

# QQI early exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher Education, 2014–2020



**DATA**  
SERIES




PUBLICATION DATE  
08 | 2021



**QQI**

Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann



This paper provides an early exploration, starting with QQI certification data, on how best to examine the state of play in the supply and uptake of HE (higher education) micro-credentials in Ireland.

QQI HE awards account for a small fraction of all HE awards in the NFQ (less than 8% of all awards made in the HE sector are made by QQI).

To apply the methodology to the whole of HE, QQI is thankful to HEA for providing available data on the minor, special purpose and supplemental enrolments from some HE institutions.

Assumption - For this study, we define a HE micro-credential as a HE qualification involving up to and including 30 ECTS that is included in the NFQ i.e., in the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ).

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HE micro-credentials have recently captured the imagination of Irish institutions. While the term micro-credential is fairly new, the infrastructure for small HE qualifications has long been established in Irish higher education. What is really new for Ireland is that the concept of small HE qualifications has gained international acceptance and therefore recognition.

Micro-credentials are said to have the potential to address the lifelong learning needs of the workforce allowing institutions to provide focussed courses to address the rapidly changing needs of technological and social transformations.

The COVID-19 crisis and the 2008 recession each illustrated how quickly economies can transform and have accelerated the demand for focussed up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities. The recent transition to, and growth of confidence in, largely remote teaching, learning and assessment may further increase the interest in micro-credentials by making them accessible to a wider group of people.

In this context, a reflection on micro-credentials, their quality assurance, certification and recognition are critical.

## 1.1. Context – a growing demand for micro-credentials

Private sector HE institutions in Ireland have sent clear signals that the tertiary sector should take micro-credentials seriously. So much so that QQI's Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC) approved new micro-credential courses across a wide range of disciplines in December 2020<sup>1</sup> using a streamlined approach for rapid validation of micro-credentials arising from modules of previously validated programmes<sup>2</sup>.

Private providers have also requested that the streamlined model for micro-credentials be extended further to include new programmes (i.e., ones with no connection to a previously validated programme) and modification of modules which had been taken from a previously validated programme(s).

The IUA institutions have also demonstrated a commitment to micro-credentials. The Multi-Campus (seven universities) Micro-Credentials Project is a five-year €12.3 million project funded under the Human Capital Initiative (HCI)<sup>3</sup>:

- an academic framework for the design and recognition of micro-credentials;
- an enterprise-led partnership to facilitate demand-side interests;
- a portal to promote awareness of micro-credentials, linked to a digital credentialling solution (potentially Europass);
- the stimulation of new standalone micro-credentials across the seven universities.

The drivers are lifelong learning; upskilling/re-skilling as part of COVID recovery; digital and green transformation; micro-credentials to be short, capable of being offered as stand alone, stackable and portable qualifications, and are to be included within the NFQ and underpinned by QA.

<sup>1</sup> In summer 2020, QQI undertook a pilot scheme to streamline the validation process for micro-credentials. With the cooperation of private HET providers, a process was developed whereby providers could submit standalone programmes of between 5 and 30 ECTS which led to QQI special purpose awards. Of the 10 original programmes submitted for validation in the pilot in October 2020, eight have been validated, one refused validation and one is recommended for validation at the April 2021 PAEC. All these programmes comprised single modules drawn from previously validated programmes of larger volume and ranged in size from 5 to 20 ECTS.

<sup>2</sup> See further information at: <https://www.qqi.ie/News/Pages/Putting-Microcredentials-on-the-Agenda.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> The HCI aims to deliver an investment targeted towards increasing capacity in HE in skills-focused programmes designed to meet priority skills needs. It seeks to promote innovative and responsive models of programme delivery and to enable the HE system to respond rapidly to changes in both skills requirements and technology. These skills needs were identified by HEA, the National Skills Council, including publications from the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU), the work of the Regional Skills Fora, the NTF Advisory Group, and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, and direct involvement of employers. The HCI also responded to the targets outlined in the National Skills Strategy, Technology Skills 2022, and other government strategies. See further information at: Human Capital Initiative | Skills and Engagement | Higher Education Authority (hea.ie)

Also in December 2020, the European Commission published the [European Approach to Micro-credentials report](#)<sup>4</sup>; which analyses how a European approach to micro-credentials will help widen learning opportunities and strengthen the role of HE institutions in lifelong learning.

### 1.2. What are micro-credentials?

There is a common understanding among researchers that the term micro-credentials in HE has emerged to draw a contrast with credentials traditionally conferred by HEIs at the completion of major study programmes (associate, bachelor, master and doctoral degrees)<sup>5</sup>. Digital badges and small-volume industry-recognised credentials could also be considered micro-credentials.

The Higher Education unit of the European Commission DG EAC characterises micro-credentials as

*'a recognised proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards. The proof is contained in a certified document that lists the name of the holder, the achieved learning outcomes, the assessment method, the awarding body and, where applicable, the qualifications framework level and the credits gained. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared, are portable and may be combined into larger credentials or qualifications. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards'*<sup>6</sup>.

This definition is subject to change as the EU prepares for a Council Recommendation on micro-credentials in 2022.

QQI's understanding of micro-credentials accords with the EC definition<sup>7</sup>: micro-credentials are *similar to minor, special purpose or supplemental award-types but can be significantly smaller in volume and, in contrast with minor awards, don't necessarily need to be part of a larger volume qualification though they can be aggregated and potentially used in RPL processes to gain exemptions from parts of, and advanced entry to, programmes leading to NFQ qualifications. They are especially useful to record the acquisition of specific skills needed by individuals, e.g. for work'*.

### 1.3. Micro-credentials and their impact on lifelong learning within the workforce

Data on micro-credentials in Ireland is patchy. To gain some insight into the demand for micro-credentials, we align with OECD's approach which uses data on non-formal education and training as a proxy for participation in lifelong learning that might potentially lead to micro-credentials. Viewed within the ISCED framework (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012[9]), *non-formal education is an addition and/or a complement to formal education within the process of the lifelong learning of individuals*<sup>8</sup>. According to OECD, micro-credentials share many of characteristics of non-formal education and training as per the UNESCO definition. While this 'proxy' helps us to understand some aspects of micro-credentials, QQI believes that micro-credentials should be part of what is considered 'formal education', as per the definition in section 1.2.

#### 1.3.1 Who benefits most from micro-credentials?

Data collected by the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) on the adult population (in 25-65 age range) in over 40 countries reveals that learners who have engaged in 'non-formal' education in adulthood:

- are 31 percentage points more likely to have completed higher education than those without it;
- tend to be employed individuals in the prime working age of 25-54;
- tend to earn higher median wages, and work for larger firms.

4 [A European approach to micro-credentials \(europa.eu\)](#). Micro-credentials were announced in the European Skills Agenda, published on 1 July 2020, as one of its 12 flagship actions to support quality and transparency across the EU HE. They were included in the September 2020 Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025 to emphasise HE's key role in supporting lifelong learning and reaching out to a more diverse group of learners. They were also included in the September 2020 Digital Education Action Plan.

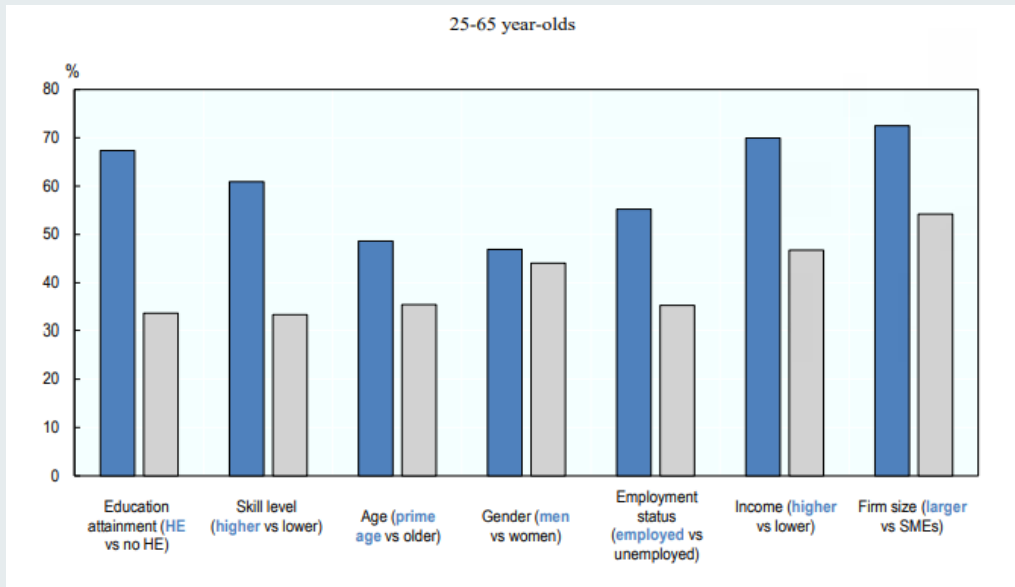
5 OECD education working paper No. 216, Directorate for Education and Skills: [The Emergence of Alternative Credentials](#); 10 March 2020.

6 European Commission [A European approach to micro-credentials \(europa.eu\)](#), December 2020.

7 According to QQI's Technical Paper on Qualifications-Final.pdf (qqi.ie) micro-credentials can certify the kind of bite sized learning outcomes that are often in demand in the workplace. They are well suited to continuing professional development.

8 UNESCO glossary - [Non-formal education](#) | UNESCO UIS

**Figure 1** – Percentages of adults participating in non-formal education and training in OECD countries and economies, by individual characteristics (2012, 2015 or 2018).



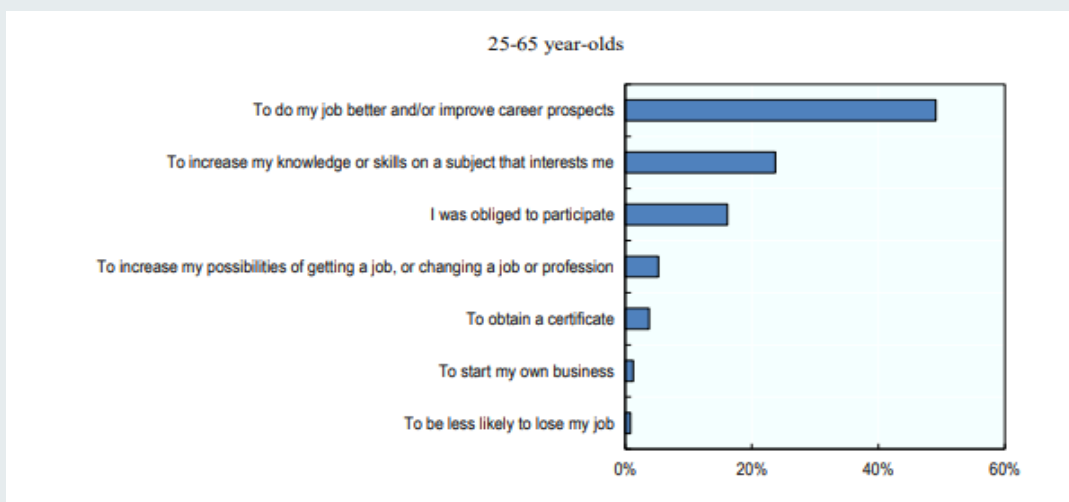
Source: OECD (2019[48]), Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), [www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/) (accessed on 20 December 2019).

When looking at learners' reasons and motivations, non-formal E&T have typically been sought out by individuals for work-related reasons:

- to 'do their jobs better and improve career prospects';
- to focus on narrow components of a learning area.

It suggests that non-formal E&T provide professional development opportunities for young professionals.

**Figure 2** – Reasons for participating in non-formal education and training in OECD countries and economies (2012, 2015 or 2018).



Source: OECD (2019[48]), Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), [www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/) (accessed on 20 December 2019).



From these findings, we can ascertain that opening formal education systems to small volume focussed qualifications has the potential to:

- facilitate skills education that has strong correlations to work and workforce enhancement opportunities;
- fulfil the needs of upskilling or reskilling the workforce, particularly relevant in the context of high technological innovation and change in the economy; and
- create customised skillsets for young professionals.

### 1.3.2. Employers and micro-credentials, the potential to address the 'education gap'

As commented earlier, data on micro-credentials is limited as they are not identified in the educational attainment component of national labour force surveys or in international surveys of adult skills (such as PIAAC).

However, the results of the latest National Employer Survey 20189 in Ireland suggest that 'complementary credentials' are supporting employers' efforts to address the 'education gap' (a four-year university degree contrasts with the rapidly changing knowledge and skills needs of the labour force). The survey shows that:

- more than 85% of employers in Ireland support staff to engage in continuing professional development, with somewhat higher incidence of this among employers with more than 50 employees (93%), multinational firms (91%) and employers in Dublin (91%).
- 46% claim to fully fund the cost of professional development, another 38% part-fund the cost of professional development, while 35% provide paid study leave.
- there are high levels of collaboration between employers and both HE and FET institutions to deliver this type of training (with most collaborations cited being of a work-oriented nature; 24% collaborating on the upskilling of staff and 19% collaborating on apprenticeships).

These findings are in line with the PIAAC survey results presented earlier. They show that:

- employers are supporting employees to utilise complementary education to gain the skills that make the labour force more productive,
- employers and education and training institutions are engaging in initiatives to deliver these skills, which suggests common efforts towards addressing the education gap.

Despite the potential benefits of micro-credentials in supporting continuing professional development and lifelong learning, a survey carried out by Skillnet Ireland in summer 2020 found that nearly half of employers surveyed (49%) had heard of the term 'micro-credential', only 37% of employees had; and that exposure to micro-credentials day-to-day was limited: 80% of employers said they 'never' or 'rarely' came across them on job applications, while only 20% of employees had earned a micro-credential<sup>10</sup>. This indicates the need to mature the understanding of micro-credentials among stakeholders.

### 1.3.3. Why do providers award micro-credentials?

According to OECD, HE providers can benefit from micro-credentials by capitalising on the education gap, leveraging employer collaboration initiatives and exploring 'unbundled' learning pathways. They are a 'low-risk, high-yield' opportunity, which:

*'increase their visibility and reputation, experimenting with new pedagogies and technologies, generating additional income or reducing costs, as well as increasing their responsiveness to learners' and labour markets' demands'<sup>11</sup>.*

9 The National Employer Survey is a joint project undertaken by the Higher Education Authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland and SOLAS which aims to ascertain employers' views on the overall quality of recent HE and FET and graduates, any barriers to graduate recruitment and collaboration between business and educational institutions. Responses to the survey came from 760 organisations. The report is available at: <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Irish%20National%20Employer%20Survey%202018.pdf>

10 Data was collected from 61 employers and 160 employees across the industry in Ireland during a selected two-week period from July 15st - 31st, 2020. See report at <https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/A-Micro-Credential-Roadmap-Currency-Cohesion-and-Consistency.pdf>

11 OECD education working paper No. 216, Directorate for Education and Skills: [The Emergence of Alternative Credentials](#); 10 March 2020.

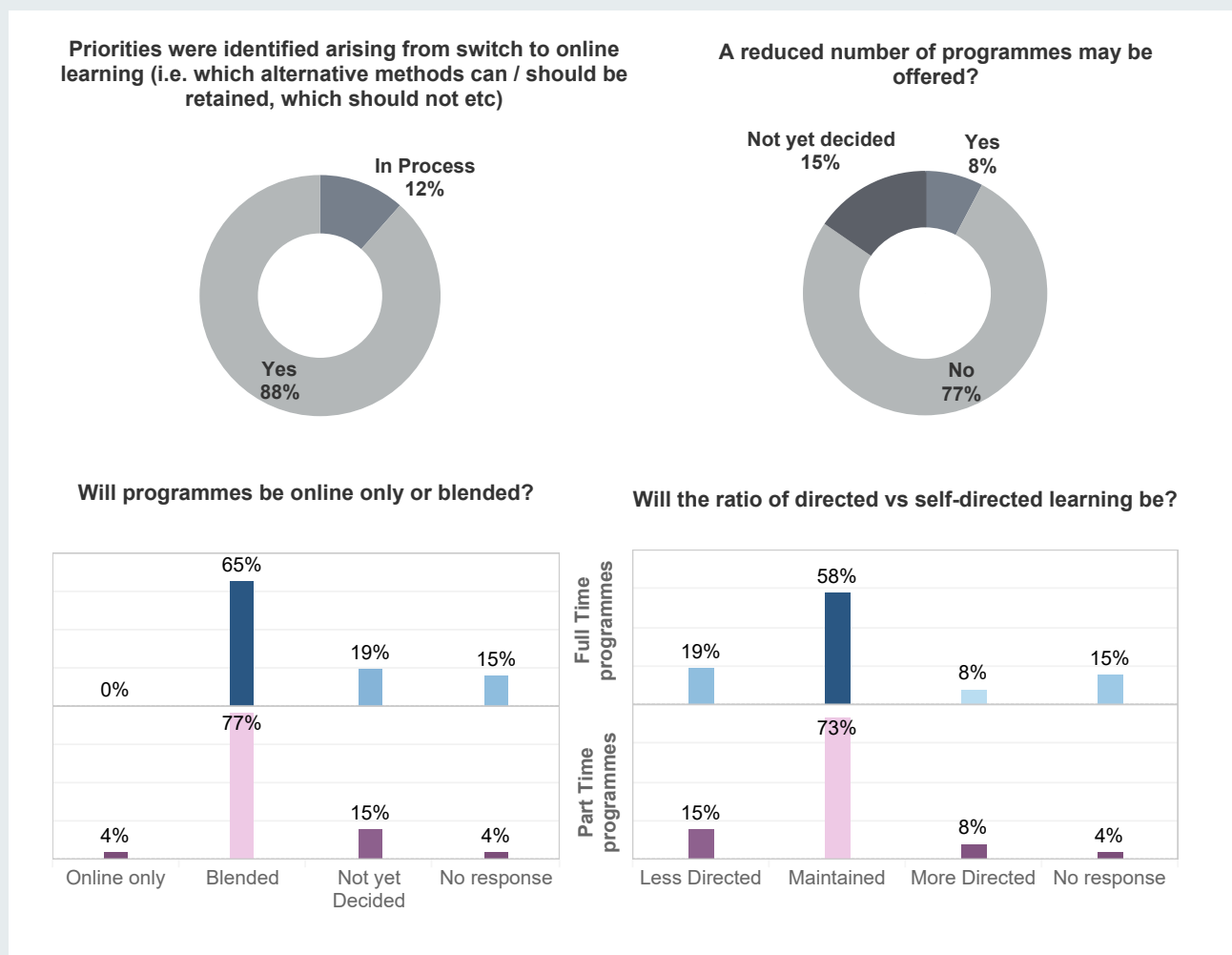
By unpacking elements of an existing programme into separate or 'bite-sized' components leading to micro-credentials, HE providers are reconsidering and expanding how they offer education to learners; and operating under COVID-19 restrictions has accelerated this process.

### 1.3.4. COVID-19 and micro-credentials

In summer 2020, QQI conducted several analyses to assess the impact of COVID-19 related restrictions. The results of these analyses suggest a shift to flexible learning that COVID-19 simply accelerated. The pandemic has resulted in a new confidence in online learning and has catalysed new reflections around new ways of delivering teaching and micro-credentialism.

In July 2020, QQI carried out a questionnaire among QQI HE institutions to present information on how programme delivery and assessment Spring / Summer 2020 were addressed by these institutions in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. 26 HE private/independent institutions completed the questionnaire. It was found that QQI private/independent HEIs put in place teaching and learning processes that prioritised blended and off-campus online learning; and together with more self-directed learning, HEIs reported that these elements will be maintained post COVID-19-related restrictions.

**Figure 3** – QQI HE institutions and teaching and learning processes post COVID-19 pandemic





The results of this questionnaire illustrate how quickly HE institutions adapted to online approaches to teaching and learning, assessment and certification processes; and learners' preference for accessible and flexible, 'blended learning' (i.e. a mix of traditional, classroom-based learning and learning delivered online).

The QQI project on *The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education* completed in August 2020<sup>12</sup>, reported similar findings. It showed HE students were positive about efforts made by their institutions in the context of COVID-19 restrictions. The report notes that *'it may have opened eyes to new possibilities and challenged the necessity of some ingrained practices that may have been considered sacrosanct until COVID-19 struck.'*

The Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) is a database of programmes and a register of providers maintained by QQI. The portal was launched in July 2020 and is under development. It lists quality-assured, recognised qualifications offered by universities, institutes of technology, private HE colleges, education and training boards, and private FE providers delivering courses leading to a QQI award. QQI is continuing to work with awarding bodies to ensure the database is fully populated and entries kept up to date. All designated awarding bodies publish their qualifications to the IRQ.

The database provides a comprehensive list of all quality-assured education and training qualifications offered in Ireland and included within the National Framework of Qualifications.

In this section we look at the information provided by Irish HE awarding bodies in the IRQ portal on their HE qualifications of up to 30 ECTS credits. The information was downloaded from the portal on 20/05/2021. We focus here on micro-credentials awarded by HE institutions other than QQI contained in the IRQ portal. Section 3 and 4 focus on HE micro-credentials awarded by QQI.

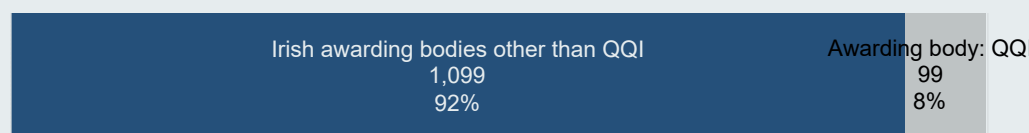
### 2.1. Micro-credentials listed in the IRQ portal in 2021

As of 20/05/2021, the IRQ contains 1,198 higher education qualifications that can be classified as micro-credentials (i.e. maximum 30 ECTS credits, HE NFQ Levels 6 to 9).

Not all Irish HE awarding bodies have published micro-credentials in the IRQ portal. Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, University College Cork, University College Galway and their *linked providers* have not done so as yet. Therefore, this analysis of HE micro-credentials is partially incomplete.

Chart 2.1 below shows that the majority of 1,198 HE micro-credentials included in the IRQ portal are awarded by Irish awarding bodies other than QQI. Only 8% are awarded by QQI (further information on QQI micro-credentials in section 3 and 4<sup>13</sup>).

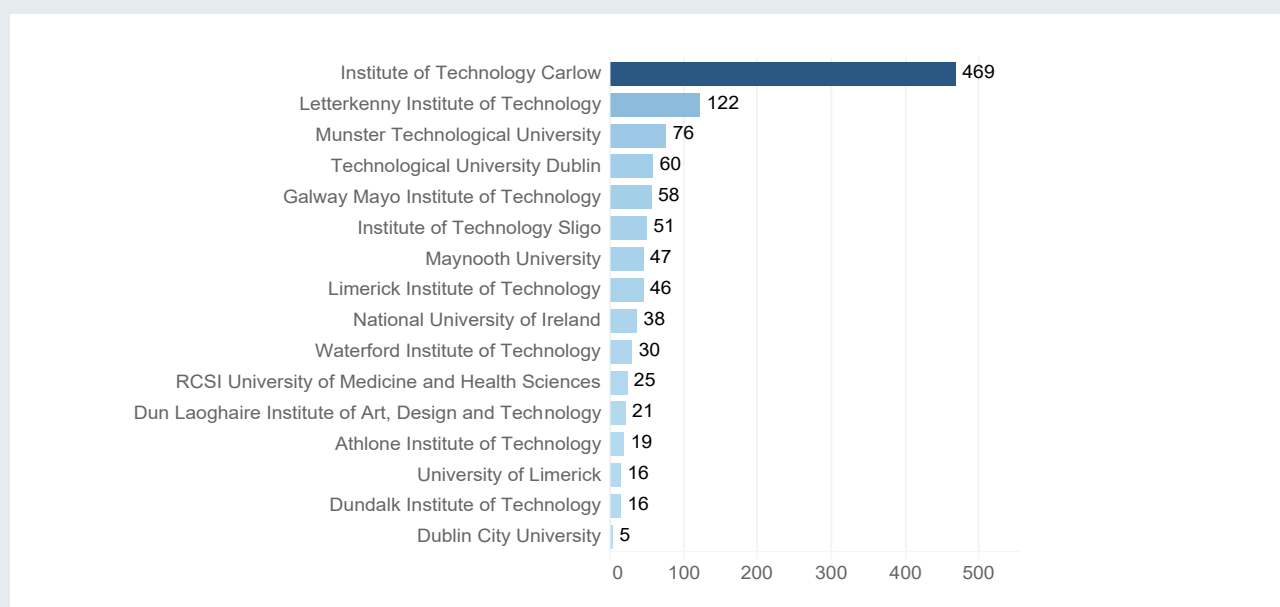
**Chart 2.1.** Micro-credentials qualifications contained in the IRQ portal on the 20/05/2021



### 2.2. Micro-credentials listed in the IRQ portal issued by Irish HE awarding bodies other than QQI

Chart 2.2 below lists these Irish HE awarding bodies (see also information on *linked providers* in Table 2.1) and the number of micro-credentials they are currently offering. It shows that the Institute of Technology Carlow is the largest HE awarding body of micro-credentials included in the IRQ portal.

<sup>13</sup> Currently there are 108 QQI HE programmes that lead to micro-credentials and 99 qualifications, i.e. there are several programmes that lead to a single qualification.

**Chart 2.2.** Irish HE awarding bodies of micro-credentials contained in the IRQ portal on the 20/05/2021**Table 2.1** Number of micro-credentials delivered by linked providers

Awarding body	Linked provider	No. Micro-credentials
National University of Ireland	Institute of Public Administration	38
University of Limerick	Mary Immaculate College Limerick	2

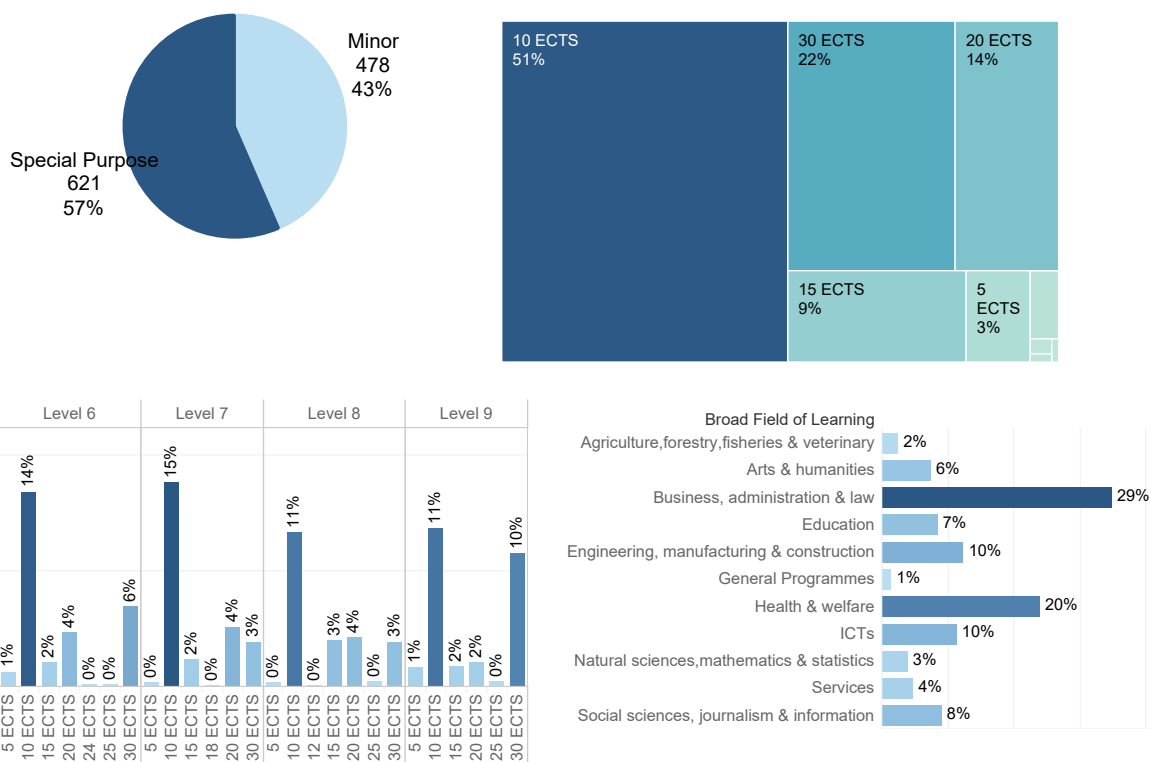
Dashboard 1 below presents information on these micro-credentials. It shows that:

- 57% are special purpose awards and 43% are minor awards.
- half of all micro-credentials are of 10 ECTS.
- micro-credentials of 30, 20, 15 and 5 ECTS are more common than of 24, 18 or 12 ECTS. See further information on ECTS in Table 2.2. below.
- almost a quarter of all micro-credentials included in the IRQ are made at level 9 (mostly of 30 and 10 ECTS).
- almost half of these micro-credentials are issued in the 'Business, administration & law' (29%) and 'Health & welfare' (20%) fields of learning.

## 2. MICRO-CREDENTIALS IN THE IRISH REGISTER OF QUALIFICATIONS PORTAL [CONTINUED]

[PAGE 12]

### Dashboard 1 - Overview - Qualifications leading to micro-credentials issued by HE awarding bodies other than QQI - IRQ 20/05/2021

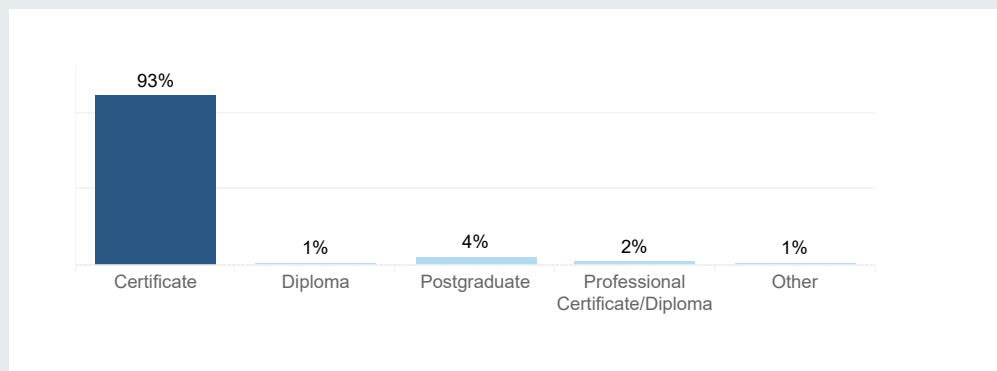


**Table 2.2** ECTS value of HE micro-credentials contain in the IRQ portal - 20/05/2021

Credit	Number of Qualifications	% of Total
5 ECTS	37	3%
10 ECTS	616	51%
12 ECTS	1	0%
15 ECTS	102	9%
18 ECTS	1	0%
20 ECTS	163	14%
24 ECTS	2	0%
25 ECTS	12	1%
30 ECTS	264	22%

Chart 2.3 below shows that the majority of these micro-credentials are titled by HE awarding bodies as 'Certificate'. There are other titles used by HE awarding bodies. We would welcome further discussion on the issue with the awarding bodies.

**Chart 2.3.** Titles of micro-credentials issued by HE awarding bodies other than QQI – IRQ 20/05/2021



### 2.3. Micro-credentials and delivery methods - HE awarding bodies other than QQI

The IRQ portal also includes information on courses and associated teaching and learning delivery methods. However, the information on these delivery methods is very patchy as it is not a mandatory data field to be supplied.

Chart 2.4 shows that among the HE awarding bodies that supplied this information, campus-based delivery on both a full-time and part-time basis are the most common delivery methods of micro-credentials.

However, these findings should be treated with care as half of the HE awarding bodies did not provide information in the IRQ portal in this regard (see 'blank' values below).

**Chart 2.4.** Teaching and learning delivery methods of micro-credentials issued by HE awarding bodies other than QQI by type – IRQ 20/05/2021

Mode	Delivery Methods			
	College Campus	Online	Workplace	Blank
Both	65%	1%	1%	33%
Full time	27%	18%		55%
Part time	4%	6%		90%
Total	46%	3%	1%	51%

# 3. ANALYSIS OF HE MICRO-CREDENTIALS AWARDED BY QQI

This analysis describes QQI validation and certification data between 2014 and 2020 in respect of HE programmes involving up to 30 ECTS credits (which we will contract to 30 ECTS).

## 3.1. QQI data - validation and provision

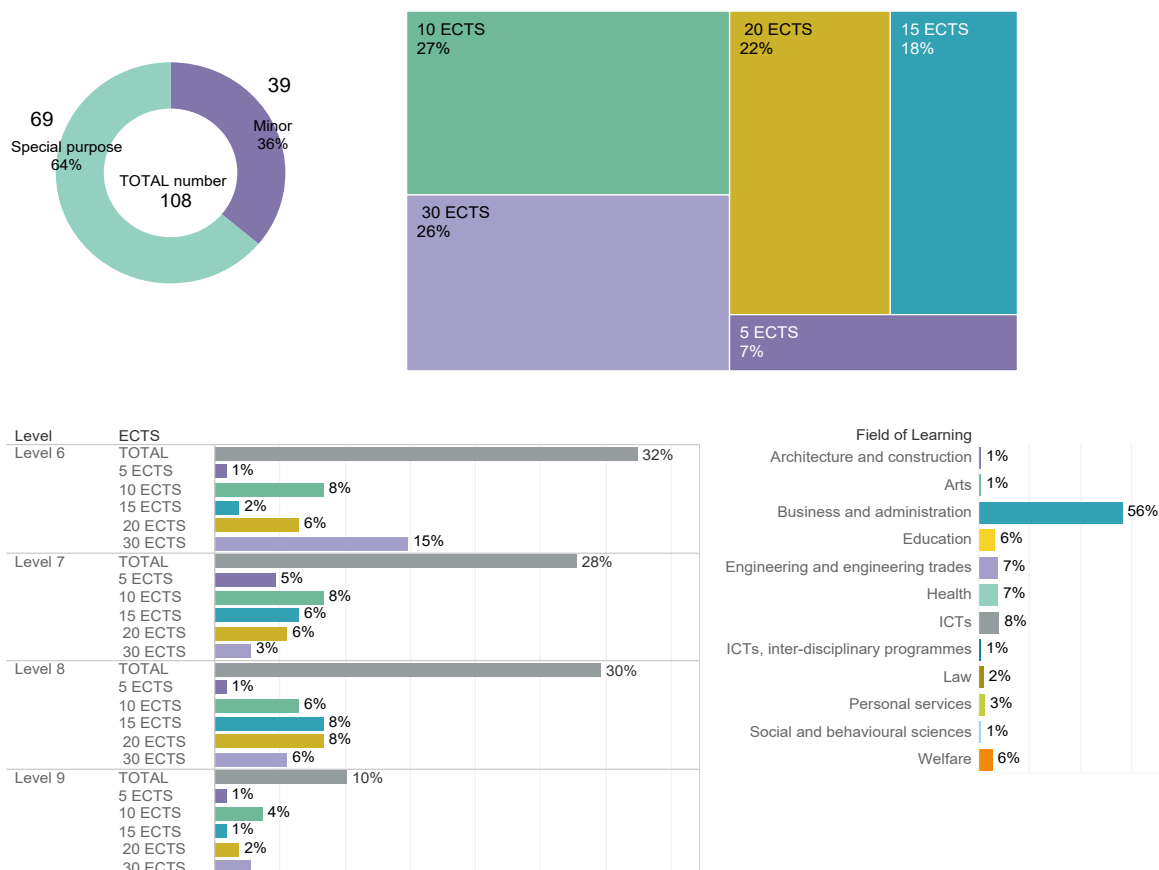
### 3.1.1. Validation of QQI HE micro-credential programmes

In 2020 there were 108 standalone programmes leading to QQI minor and special purpose awards in HE at levels 6 to 9, ranging in size from 5 to 30 ECTS. Most of these programmes comprise single modules drawn from previously validated programmes of larger volume.

Dashboard 2 and Table 3.1 below provide information on these QQI micro-credentials. They show that:

- almost three in four of all QQI micro-credentials are special purpose awards (69 or 64%), 36% are minor awards.
- the most common credit values are 10 and 30 ECTS.
- only 7% of all validated micro-credential programmes between 2014 and 2020 were of 5 ECTS (8 programmes). So far, none has been certified (see information on certification in section 4).
- levels 6 and 8 are the typical NFQ levels.
- most micro-credentials are issued in the 'Business and administration' (56%) field of learning.

### Dashboard 2 – Overview – QQI HE validated programmes leading to micro-credentials





### 3. ANALYSIS OF HE MICRO-CREDENTIALS AWARDED BY QQI [CONTINUED]

Table 3.1 below provides information on the number of validated programmes by QQI HE institutions leading to micro-credentials by class, NFQ level and number of ECTS. It shows that validated programmes at level 6 for minor awards and levels 7 and 8 for special purpose awards are more numerous than at other levels; commonly of 10 and 30 ECTS.

**Table 3.1** – Number of QQI HE validated programmes leading to micro-credentials by class, NFQ level and ECTS credits

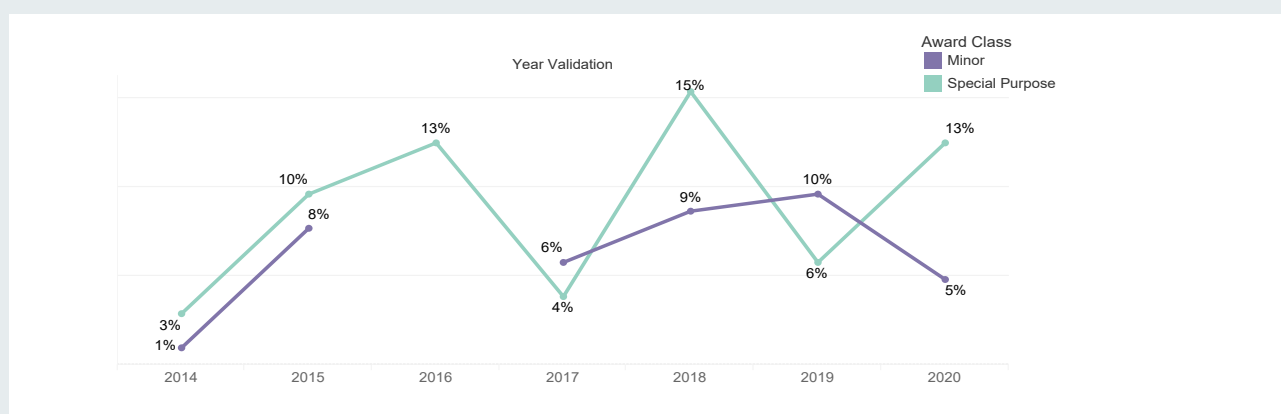
	Minor						Special purpose					
	5 ECTS	10 ECTS	15 ECTS	20 ECTS	30 ECTS	Total	5 ECTS	10 ECTS	15 ECTS	20 ECTS	30 ECTS	Total
Level 6	1	5	1	5	6	18	4	1	2	10		17
Level 7	4	4	1			9	1	5	6	6	3	21
Level 8			3	3	2	8	1	7	6	6	4	24
Level 9		1		1	2	4	1	3	1	1	1	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>69</b>

Table 3.2 and chart 3.1 below show the validation year of QQI micro-credentials (years considered 2014–2020). They show that micro-credentials are not new in the Irish HE context, but provision has evolved over the years and more programmes are being validated. We learn that validation activity for QQI special purpose awards is more dynamic and has evolved more rapidly than for minor awards, with clear peaks and troughs.

**Table 3.2** – Validation year of QQI HE validated programmes leading to micro-credentials by class, NFQ level, 2014–2020

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<b>Minor</b>							
Level 6		2		5	6	5	
Level 7		5		1	2	1	
Level 8	1	1			1	2	3
Level 9						2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>		<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Special Purpose</b>							
Level 6	2		6		3	1	2
Level 7			3	2	10	1	4
Level 8	1	10	3	1	3	3	3
Level 9			1	1		1	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>18</b>

**Chart 3.1** – Validation year of QQI HE validated programmes leading to micro-credentials by class, percentages 2014–2020



# 3. ANALYSIS OF HE MICRO-CREDENTIALS AWARDED BY QQI [CONTINUED]

Table 3.3 below shows the number of QQI micro-credential programmes validated (see reference year) that have currently expired. It shows that most of these programmes had 30 ECTS and were validated in 2015.

**Table 3.3** – Number of QQI micro-credentials currently expired

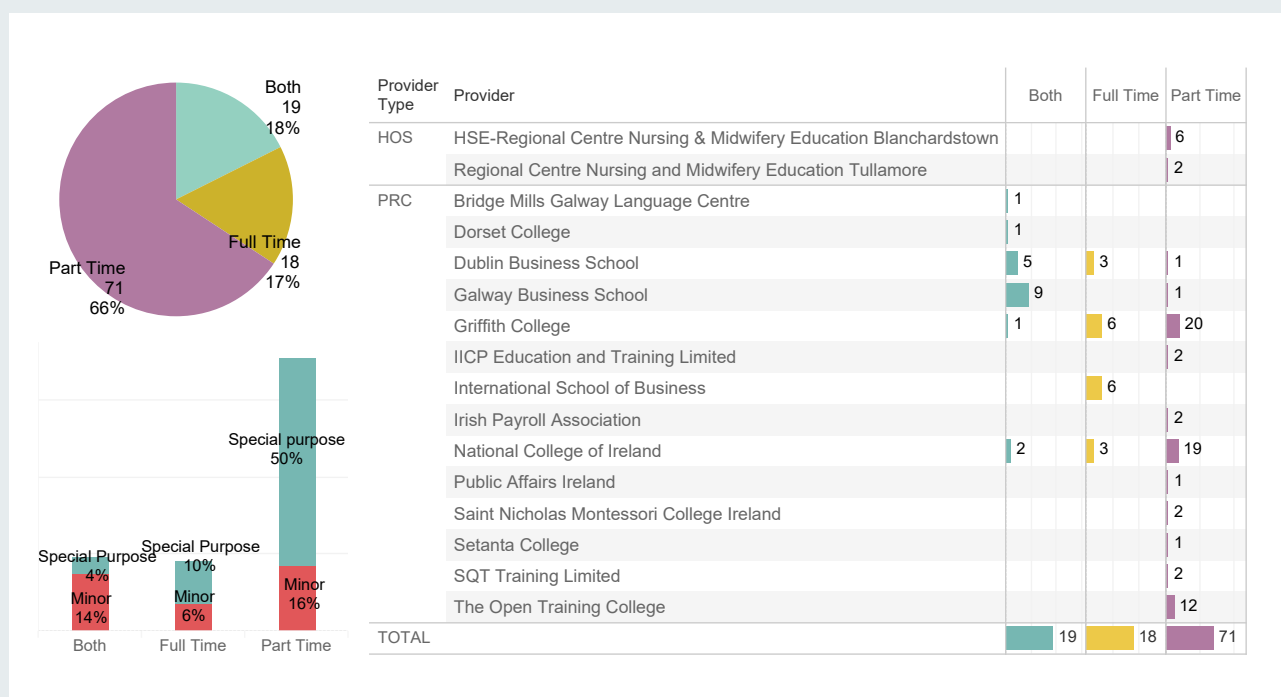
ECTS	2014	2015	2018
Minor			
15		1	
20	1		
30	2	6	3
Special Purpose			
10		2	1
20	1	1	1
30	1	3	
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>

### 3.1.2. Provision: full time and part time programmes

Dashboard 3 below provides information on the 108 standalone programmes leading to QQI micro-credentials. It shows that:


- almost all (90 programmes out of 108 or 84%) are provided on a part-time basis, for both minor and special purpose awards; within this, 21% are offered on both a full-time and part-time basis.
- there are 16 QQI providers offering programmes leading to micro-credentials. There are two classes of providers involved: Private Providers (PRC) and Hospital CNEs (HOS).
- the QQI providers with the largest numbers of MC programmes are National College of Ireland and Griffith College.

**Dashboard 3 - Provision** – QQI providers by programme delivery mode (part-time, full-time) 2014–2020




## KEY TAKEAWAYS 1

### Trends 2014–2020 – QQI validation data




1

QQI validated programmes leading to small HE volume qualifications are not a new phenomenon in Ireland, but their number is growing significantly.



2

Validated programmes at level 6 for minor awards and levels 7 and 8 for special purpose awards are more numerous than at other levels; commonly of 10 and 30 ECTS.



3

The majority are delivered on a part-time basis.

### 3.2. QQI certification data – micro-credentials demand and provision, trends 2014–2020

This section analyses the provision of and demand for QQI micro-credentials between 2014 and 2020. It shows that provision of QQI micro-credentials between these years is very skewed: almost half of all learners who achieved these attended the Irish Payroll Association (IPASS).

However, Chart 3.2 below shows that this overall proportion is declining at a very rapid pace: a shift occurred in 2017, and subsequently increasing number of QQI providers have entered the QQI micro-credentials market.

**Chart 3.2 – Overview**, total number of QQI micro-credential holders by provider, 2014–2020

Category	Provider	Number of Holders	Percentage
HEI	National College of Ireland	363	5%
	The Open Training College	1	0%
HOS	HSE Regional Centre Nursing & Midwifery Education Blanchardstown	198	3%
	HSE Regional Centre Nursing & Midwifery Education Tullamore	55	1%
PRC	Dublin Business School	431	6%
	Galway Business School	25	0%
	Griffith College	412	5%
	IICP Education and Training Limited	343	5%
	International School of Business	540	7%
	Irish Payroll Association	3,485	46%
	National College of Ireland	537	7%
	Public Affairs Ireland	43	1%
	Setanta College	332	4%
	SQT Training Limited	557	7%
The Open Training College	205	3%	

### 3. ANALYSIS OF HE MICRO-CREDENTIALS AWARDED BY QQI [CONTINUED]

**Chart 3.3** – Trends 2014–2020, proportion of total number of QQI micro-credential holders by provider and year

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Dublin Business School				7%	7%	9%	7%
Galway Business School					1%	0%	0%
Griffith College	10%	13%	8%	4%	5%	3%	4%
HSE Regional Centre Nursing & Midwifery Education Blanchardstown	2%	2%	4%	3%	5%	3%	0%
HSE Regional Centre Nursing & Midwifery Education Tullamore			3%	3%			
IICP Education and Training Limited				9%	8%	4%	4%
International School of Business		8%	6%	11%	8%	7%	6%
Irish Payroll Association	88%	73%	76%	40%	38%	36%	33%
National College of Ireland		4%	2%	15%	12%	14%	19%
Public Affairs Ireland							3%
Setanta College			2%	3%	5%	7%	7%
SQT Training Limited				5%	12%	12%	10%
The Open Training College					0%	6%	7%

Chart 3.4 below presents these proportions according to award class.

**Chart 3.4** – Trends 2014–2020, proportion of total number of QQI micro-credential holders by provider and year according to award class

<b>Minor</b>	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Dublin Business School					18%	17%	14%
Galway Business School					15%	4%	3%
Griffith College	100%		8%		1%	1%	5%
IICP Education and Training Limited							5%
National College of Ireland		100%					
Setanta College			92%	100%	66%	58%	55%
The Open Training College						20%	19%
<b>Special Purpose</b>	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Griffith College	10%	13%	8%	4%	5%	4%	4%
HSE Regional Centre Nursing & Midwifery Education Blanchardstown	2%	2%	4%	3%	5%	4%	0%
HSE Regional Centre Nursing & Midwifery Education Tullamore			3%	3%			
IICP Education and Training Limited				9%	8%	4%	4%
International School of Business		8%	6%	11%	9%	8%	7%
Irish Payroll Association	89%	74%	77%	41%	40%	40%	38%
Dublin Business School				7%	6%	8%	6%
National College of Ireland		4%	2%	15%	13%	16%	21%
Public Affairs Ireland							3%
SQT Training Limited				5%	12%	13%	11%
The Open Training College					0%	4%	5%

### 3. ANALYSIS OF THE MICRO-CREDENTIALS AWARDED BY QQI [CONTINUED]

Charts 3.3 and 3.4 show that the provision of QQI micro-credentials is dominated by the Irish Payroll Association. When examining this data by award class, it was noted that Setanta College dominated provision in relation to minor awards. The proportions presented in these charts show that between 2017 and 2018 the demand for and provision of QQI micro-credentials grew significantly for other providers which lowered relatively the figures for these dominating providers (see the Closer Look 1 section below for information on actual numbers).

#### CLOSER LOOK 1:

Number of learners achieving QQI micro-credentials at the Irish Payroll Association and Setanta College, 2014–2020

					Female	Male	Total
Irish Payroll Association	2014	10 ECTS	Special Purpose	Level 6	407	41	448
	2015	10 ECTS	Special Purpose	Level 6	415	56	471
	2016	10 ECTS	Special Purpose	Level 6	424	63	487
	2017	10 ECTS	Special Purpose	Level 6	456	46	502
	2018	10 ECTS	Special Purpose	Level 6	397	46	443
	2019	10 ECTS	Special Purpose	Level 6	505	67	572
	2020	10 ECTS	Special purpose	Level 6	495	67	562
<b>Total</b>					<b>3,099</b>	<b>386</b>	<b>3,485</b>
Setanta College	2016	30 ECTS	Minor	Level 6		12	12
	2017	30 ECTS	Minor	Level 6	10	28	38
	2018	30 ECTS	Minor	Level 6	14	40	54
	2019	30 ECTS	Minor	Level 6	31	74	105
	2020	30 ECTS	Minor	Level 6	45	78	123
<b>Total</b>					<b>100</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>332</b>

#### 3.2.1. QQI micro-credentials - the 20 most in demand 2014–2020

Chart 3.5 below presents the top 20 QQI micro-credentials achieved by learners by title, QQI award code<sup>14</sup> and provider. The number of learners who achieved these micro-credentials is presented as a proportion of the total (within the top 20 group) for each year. These top 20 micro-credentials have been consistently the most popular for the last number of years.

When looking at the title of the top 20 micro-credentials, it is observed that:

- they are growing in scope (different fields of learning / industry sectors).
- they seem to focus on narrow components of a learning area that is work-related. This suggests that learners who completed the programmes were seeking to upskill or reskill in a particular narrow knowledge area; and/or authenticate an existing skill or knowledge area with a certification.

<sup>14</sup> Award code: first number provides information on the NFQ level; 'S' refers to special purpose awards, 'H' minor awards. The five last digits are specific to the award and provider.

# 3. ANALYSIS OF HE MICRO-CREDENTIALS AWARDED BY QQI [CONTINUED]

**Chart 3.5** –Top 20 QQI micro-credentials 2014–2020, annual proportions

Award Title	Award Code	Provider Name	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Cert. in Payroll Techniques	6S20722	Irish Payroll Association							47.8%
	6S15578	Irish Payroll Association	90.1%	82.6%	84.8%	49.3%	47.3%	46.8%	
Cert. in Process Engineering	7S20279	SQT Training Limited				4.6%	14.0%	15.0%	14.0%
	6S20273	SQT Training Limited				1.7%	0.5%	0.6%	0.1%
Cert. in Counselling and Psychotherapeutic Studies	6S20213	IICP Education and Training Limited				11.2%	9.9%	5.0%	5.5%
Cert. in Science in Functional Screening and Resistance Training	6H19748	Setanta College			2.1%	3.7%	5.8%	8.6%	10.5%
Cert. in Digital Marketing and Media	6S20323	International School of Business				4.9%	1.7%		4.0%
	6S16968	International School of Business		6.7%	4.7%		2.6%	5.4%	
Cert. in Business Analysis	8S19784	National College of Ireland				8.4%	5.4%	4.7%	5.5%
Cert. in Advanced Taxation Planning & Advice	8S12098	Griffith College	9.9%	8.4%	3.3%	2.1%	2.6%	1.0%	
Cert. in Business for International Learners	6S20321	International School of Business				5.4%	2.8%	1.8%	2.7%
Cert. in International Business	6S20271	Dublin Business School				3.6%	3.3%	2.0%	2.0%
Cert. in Sales	6S20270	Dublin Business School				3.3%	1.9%	2.0%	2.3%
Cert. in Community Welfare Service Provision	7S20672	National College of Ireland						2.7%	1.9%
Cert. in Public Employment Services Provision	7S20673	National College of Ireland						2.0%	1.6%
Cert. in Basic Cognitive Behavioural Skills for Nurses	8S19551	HSE Regional Centre Nursing & Midwifery Education Blanchar..			1.6%		0.9%	0.8%	0.6%
Cert. in Tourism Marketing	6S20272	Dublin Business School				1.7%	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%
Cert. in Applied Tourism Marketing and Event Management	6S17016	International School of Business		2.3%	1.7%				
	6S20324	International School of Business					0.4%		
Cert. in Cardiovascular Nursing	8S19553	HSE Regional Centre Nursing & Midwifery Education Blanchar..			1.4%			0.8%	
Cert. in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy	9H20806	IICP Education and Training Limited							0.9%
Cert. in Business Communications	6H20498	Galway Business School					0.2%	0.2%	0.3%
Cert. in Business and Entrepreneurship	6H20499	Galway Business School					0.3%	0.2%	
Cert. in Building Information Modelling & Graphic Illustration	8S19804	Griffith College			0.3%				

## KEY TAKEAWAYS 2

### Trends in QQI provision of HE micro-credentials 2014–2020



The supply and scope of QQI micro-credentials have been growing at a rapid pace since 2017.



QQI certification data suggest that micro-credentials are typically sought by learners for work-related reasons, as they focus on narrow components of a learning area.



# 4. ANALYSIS OF QQI HE MICRO-CREDENTIAL HOLDERS

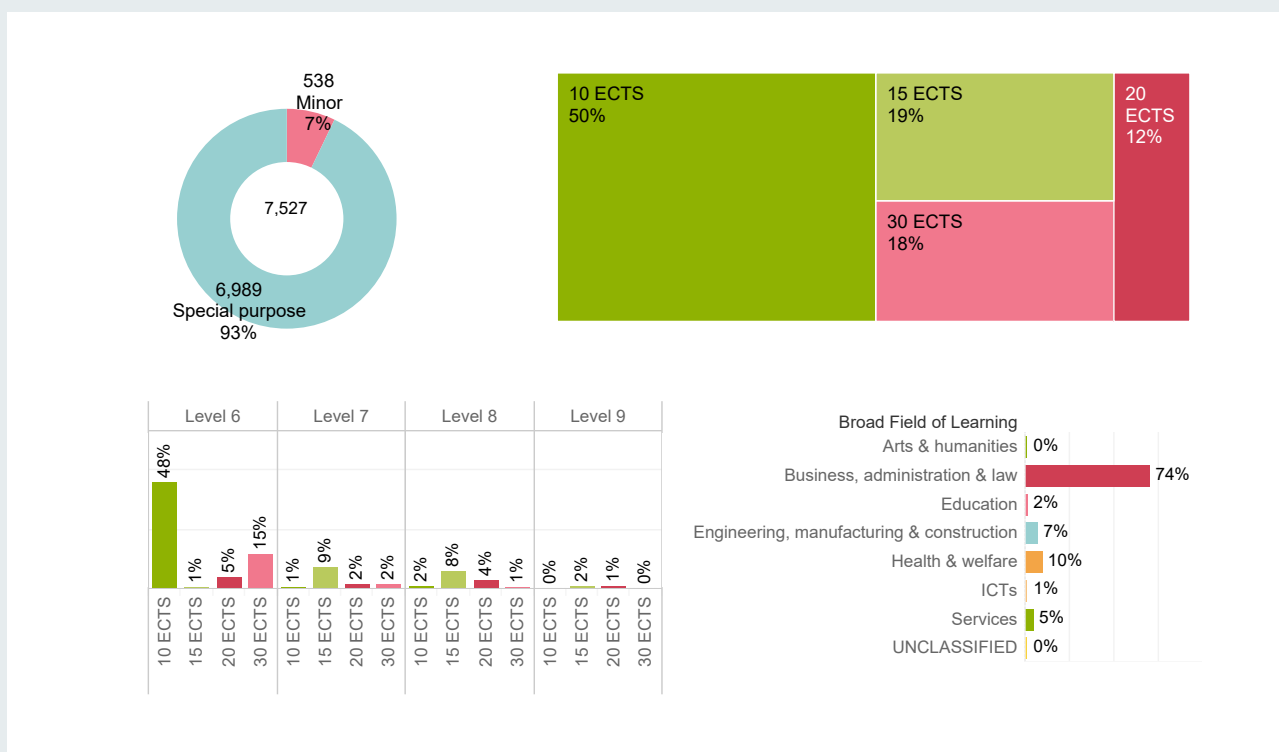
## 4.1. QQI Certification data – micro-credentials and learners, trends 2014–2020

This section reports on the number of QQI learners who achieved micro-credentials between 2014 and 2020. It looks at trends and provides information on the profiles of learners.

Dashboard 4 and Table 4.1 below show that between 2014 and 2020:

- 7,527 micro-credentials were achieved; most leading to QQI special purpose awards of 10 ECTS – see *Closer Look 2* below for further information on ECTS.
- Almost half were made at NFQ Level 6.
- Most micro-credentials were achieved in the *Business, administration and law* field of learning.

**Dashboard 4** – Overview – Total number of QQI learners achieving micro-credentials 2014–2020



**Table 4.1** – Overview – Total number of QQI learners achieving micro-credentials by level, class and ECTS credits, 2014–2020

ECTS credits	Minor				Special Purpose				Total
	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9	
10 ECTS	76	3		10	3,515	64	119		3,787
15 ECTS	2		77		60	714	492	113	1,458
20 ECTS	13		4	10	376	130	272	97	902
30 ECTS	341		2		799	166	69	3	1,380
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>432</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>4,750</b>	<b>1,074</b>	<b>952</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>7,527</b>
	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9	Total

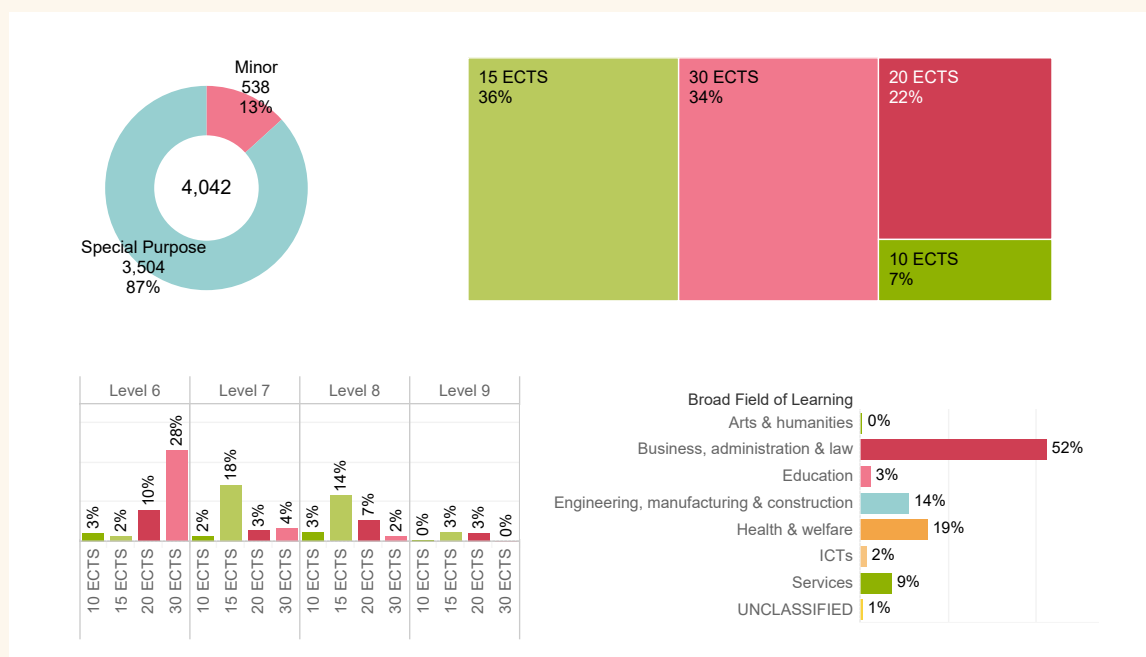
### CLOSER LOOK 2: Overview

Total number of QQI learners achieving micro-credentials 2014–2020 **excluding** data from the Irish Payroll Association

Because the provision of and demand for QQI micro-credentials between 2014 and 2020 was dominated by the Irish Payroll Association (IPASS), Dashboard 5 below presents information on QQI micro-credentials excluding this provider. It shows that general trends presented in Dashboard 3 are not affected by the large volume of QQI micro-credentials issued by the IPA.

However, it is important to note that among other QQI HE providers, the most common ECTS values achieved by learners are 15 and 30, not 10.

**Dashboard 5** – Overview – Total number of QQI learners, excluding IPASS, achieving micro-credentials 2014–2020



#### 4.2 General trends - number of QQI micro-credentials holders between 2014 and 2020

Chart 4.2 below provides information on trends relating to the number of QQI learners who achieved micro-credentials between 2014 and 2020. It shows that:

- **In relation to minor awards**, the number of learners achieving these increased dramatically between 2014 and 2020.
- **In relation to special purpose awards**, we observed that while the number of learners achieving these awards increased between 2014 and 2020 (by almost 200%), year on year, numbers decelerated between 2015 and 2016 (by 1%) and 2017 and 2018 (by 9%).

**Chart 4.2 - Overview, trends 2014-2020** – Number and percentage change of total QQI learners achieving micro-credentials between 2014 and 2020

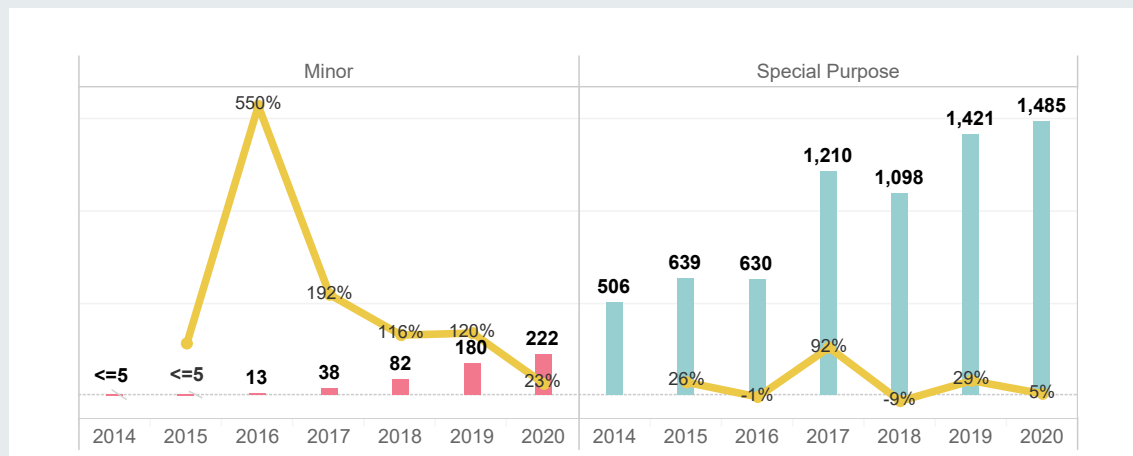


Chart 4.3 below provides information on how the demand for QQI micro-credentials according to ECTS has evolved since 2014. It shows that the full range 10 to 30 ECTS is being utilised in recent years. The provision of micro-credentials is becoming more diverse:

- the number of learners achieving QQI minor awards of smaller ECTS (of 10 and 15 ECTS) is growing against those of larger value; and
- QQI special purpose awards of larger ECTS are growing in popularity in comparison with those of smaller value.

**Chart 4.3 - Trends 2014-2020** – proportions of total MC certification 2014-2020 by awards class, year, and ECTS credits

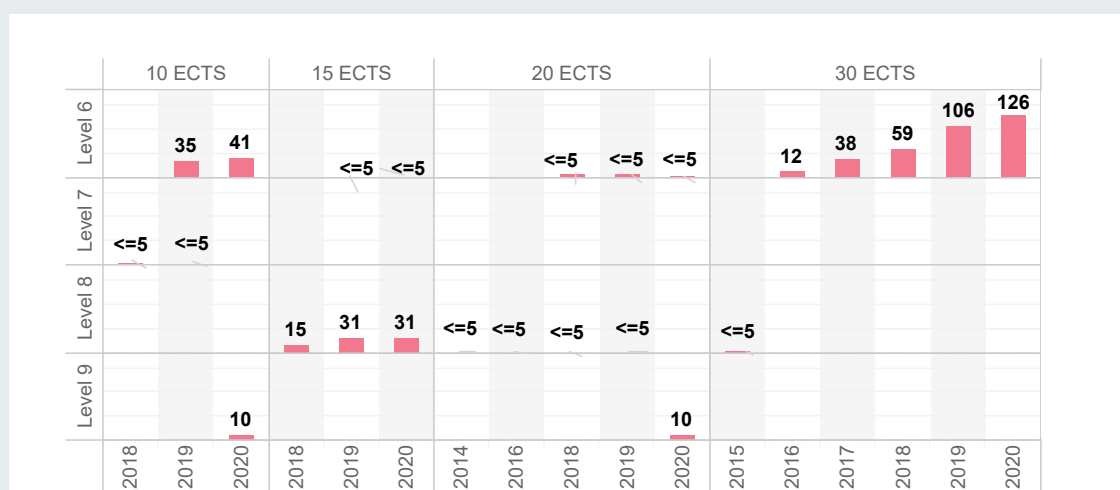
		2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Minor	10 ECTS					2%	20%	23%
	15 ECTS					18%	18%	14%
	20 ECTS	100%		8%		7%	3%	6%
	30 ECTS		100%	92%	100%	72%	59%	57%
Special Purpose	10 ECTS	89%	76%	81%	46%	45%	42%	41%
	15 ECTS	10%	8%	5%	16%	23%	27%	28%
	20 ECTS	2%	9%	8%	16%	15%	15%	13%
	30 ECTS		8%	6%	22%	17%	15%	18%

Charts 4.4 and 4.5 below present trends relating to the number of learners obtaining QQI micro-credentials broken down by award class, NFQ level and ECTS. It shows that:

### In relation to minor awards:

- most are achieved at level 6 of 30 ECTS. The demand for this group of awards has increased since 2016.
- minor awards of 20 and 30 ECTS have been certified in the last number of years; the 10 and 15 ECTS minor award programmes were first certified in 2018.
- minor awards at level 7 were first certified in 2015, but demand for these awards is not evident in certification data.
- minor awards at level 9 were first time certified in 2020 (first validated in 2019, see section 3.1).

**Chart 4.4 - Minor awards - Trends 2014–2020:** Number QQI learners between 2014 and 2020



### In relation to special purpose awards:

- most are achieved at level 6, with 10 ECTS (see *Closer Look 2* for further information on ECTS). The demand for this group of awards has increased since 2014.
- special purpose awards have been certified since 2014, including 30 ECTS awards since 2015.
- at level 6, numbers certified decreased in 2020 from 2019 for programmes of 10 and 30 ECTS by 3% and 2% respectively; but increased significantly for those of 20 and 15 ECTS.
- at level 7, programmes were first validated in 2015, and since then the numbers of learners achieving these has increased significantly year on year;
- at levels 8 and 9 numbers decreased in recent years – between 2019 and 2020 by 45% and 82% respectively.



### KEY TAKEAWAYS 3

#### Trends 2014–2020 – QQI certification data

1

Most QQI micro-credentials achieved by learners between 2014 and 2020 were special purpose awards, awarded at level 6, of 10 ECTS (see Closer Look 2 for further information on ECTS). The demand for these has remained steady over the years.

2

The size (ECTS credit) of micro-credential programmes is diversifying, and learners are capitalising on this.

3

There is a long history of awarding micro-credentials in the form of **QQI minor awards** at NFQ Levels 6 and 8. Micro-credential programmes were first validated at level 7 in 2015 but certification volumes have remained low; they were first certified in 2018. At level 9, micro-credential programmes were first validated in 2018 and certified in 2020.

4

Most micro-credentials leading to **QQI special purpose awards** are awarded at level 6. The demand for these awards decreased in 2018 (by 21%) but increased in 2020 substantially when 893 awards were achieved, the highest number since 2014. In recent years, the number of learners achieving QQI special purpose awards has increased at the lower levels (levels 6 and 7) but declined at the higher levels (levels 8 and 9).

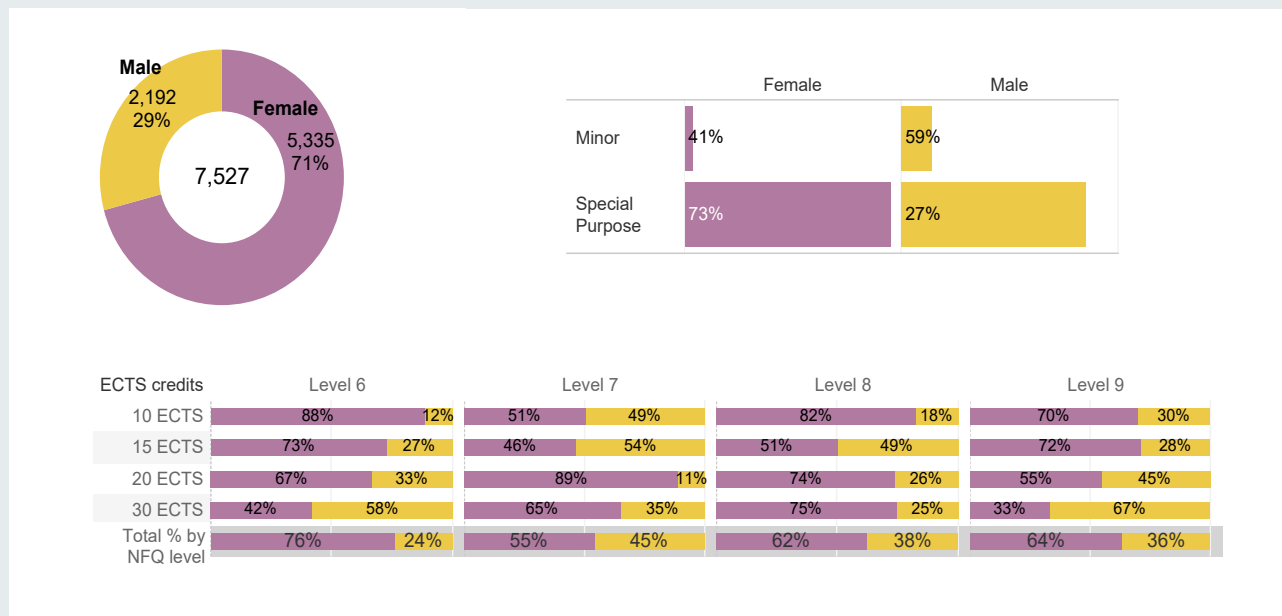
#### 4.3. Profile of QQI micro-credentials holders – General characteristics

Dashboards 6 and 7 below present the total number of learners achieving QQI micro-credentials in the 6-year period by gender and age. Numbers are broken down into award class, NFQ level and ECTS credit. They show that:

- an average 71% of all QQI micro-credentials between 2014 and 2020 were achieved by female learners;
- this overall average is affected by the large volume of special purpose awards achieved over minor awards. When breaking down proportions by class of award, male learners achieving minor awards (at 59%) are more numerous than their female counterparts (at 41%).
- the gender gap observed within special purpose awards achieved between 2014 and 2020 is likely to be affected by the large number of females obtaining micro-credentials at the IPA (see *Closer Look 1* for further information).
- Looking at NFQ level and ECTS, the gender gap is more prominent at level 6 than at the other levels (76% are female), particularly among learners achieving awards of 10 ECTS (see *Closer Look 1* for further information).
- Overall, level 7 is the most gender-balanced NFQ level; and at this level, awards of 10 ECTS are the most gender-balanced.



**Dashboard 6 - Overview** – Total number of QQI learners achieving micro-credentials by gender according to award class, NQF level and ECTS credits, 2014–2020



Dashboard 7 below shows that:

- half of all QQI micro-credentials achieved between 2014 and 2020 were by learners between 30 and 44 years of age.
- in general, male micro-credential graduates tend to be younger than female.
- learners achieving micro-credentials at level 6 tend to be younger than at other levels. At this level, the largest age band group is 20-24 years of age; those achieving awards of 30 ECTS tend to be particularly young.
- learners who achieve micro-credentials at level 9 tend to be older than at other levels. At this level, the largest age band group is 40-44; mostly they achieved awards of 15 and 20 ECTS.

**Dashboard 7 - Overview** - Total number of QQI learners achieving micro-credentials by age and gender according to award class, NQF level and ECTS credits, 2014–2020



## KEY TAKEAWAYS 4

### Trends 2014–2020, General profile of QQI micro-credential holders

When comparing QQI micro-credential holders by gender and age, we learned that:



female learners tend to be older than male. Female learners tend to achieve micro-credentials at NFQ Level 9, of 15 to 20 ECTS (typical age 40 to 44).



male learners tend to be younger than female learners (typical age 20-24) and tend to achieve at lower NFQ levels, with a greater number of ECTS (typically 30 ECTS).

### 4.4. Trends and changes between 2014 and 2020: profile of QQI micro-credential holders

This section reports on trends in the profile of QQI micro-credential holders between 2014 and 2020.

Dashboard 8 below shows that:

- female QQI micro-credential holders continue to be older than their male counterparts.
- the gender gap is closing: in 2014 the proportion of female against male learners was 87% vs 13%; in recent years it has improved to 66% vs 34%.
- as the supply of micro-credentials grows and diversifies (see section 4.4 below), it is expected that the gender gap will continue to narrow.

**Dashboard 8 - Trends 2014-2020: QQI micro-credential holders by gender and age**



Chart 4.6 below explores the distribution of QQI micro-credential holders by age and gender in each year, between 2014 and 2020<sup>15</sup>. The plot-box chart shows that there were two distinct periods: one from 2014 to 2016, the other from 2017 to 2020. Year 2017 seems to be the pivotal year when the profile of learners changed. When focusing on these two distinct periods, it is observed that:

- there is a wider distribution in the later period (i.e. between 2017 and 2020) which suggests that QQI micro-credential holders are becoming more diverse by age and gender and provision is being extended, targeting a wider group of learners.
- larger ranges of box and whiskers in the recent years show how data points are more scattered from the centre, which support the idea that QQI micro-credential holders are becoming more diverse according to age and gender.

<sup>15</sup> Plot-box shows the number of QQI learners for each year according to age bands. Colour shows details about gender. Size shows volume according to total number of learners.

**Chart 4.6 - Trends 2014-2020:** distribution of QQI micro-credential holders by gender and age

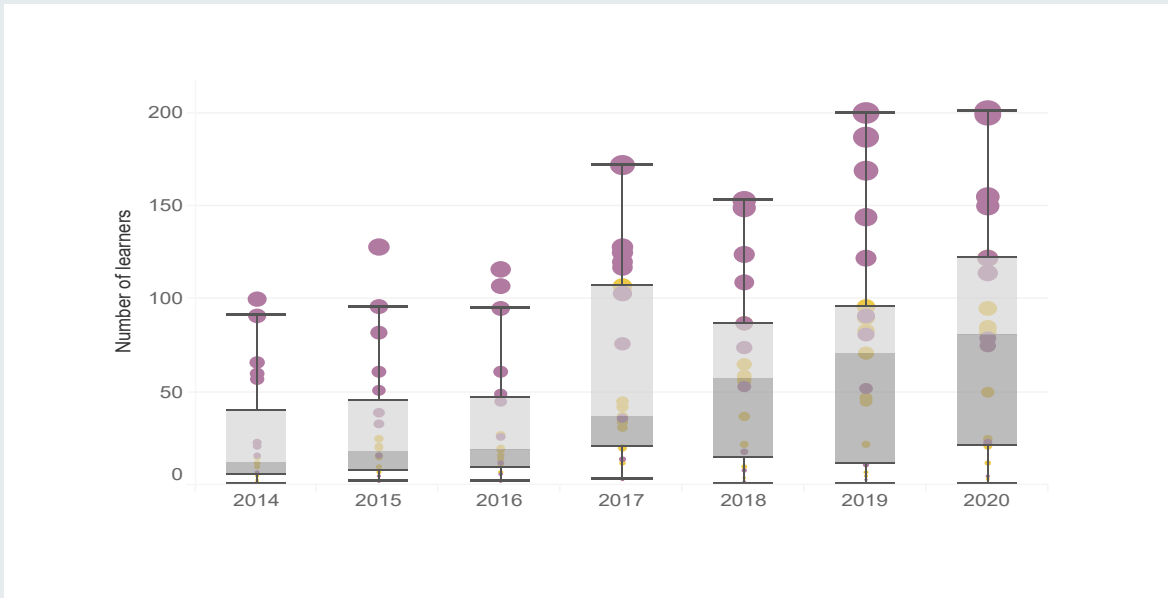
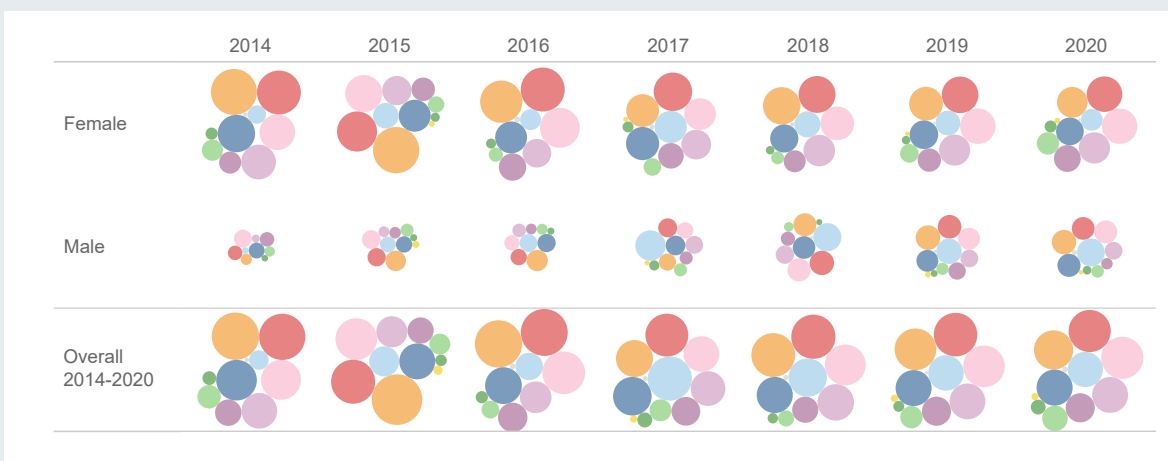


Chart 4.6 establishes that QQI micro-credentials holders in 2014 to 2016 were likely to be different from those in 2017 to 2020 by age and gender. Together with data presented in Chart 8 below, we learn that the profile of QQI micro-credential holders is evolving:

- for both female and male holders the age distribution is more spread around the 25-54 age group.
- for female learners, the 30-34 age band group is declining in favour of older groups.
- for male learners, the 20-24 age band group has become more relevant in recent years.
- age band 55-59 increased, particularly in 2020, which suggests that micro-credentials could be playing a role in upskilling a labour force where the average age is increasing.

**Chart 4.7 - Trends 2014-2020:** distribution of QQI micro-credential holders by gender and age as a proportion of total



## KEY TAKEAWAYS 5

Trends 2014–2020, changes in the profile of QQI  
micro-credential holders



In recent years, QQI micro-credential holders have become more diverse in terms of age and gender.



Provision has been extended to target a wider group of learners.

To gain a better understanding of the prevalence of qualifications that can be regarded as 'micro-credentials' in Ireland, QQI requested the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to share enrolment data gathered from HEA-funded higher education institutions (HEIs)<sup>16</sup> on courses involving 30 or fewer ECTS leading to HE qualifications. HEA provided QQI with data on enrolments for the most recent six years in courses leading to minor, special purpose and supplemental awards. HEIs do not always provide information on these types of awards to HEA. Students' personal information was neither requested nor provided. This is a QQI analysis of HEA-provided data.

Data was not available for all HEA-funded institutions as not all HEIs supply information on micro-credential enrolments to the HEA. Enrolment data was available for Athlone IT, Cork IT, Dundalk IT, Galway-Mayo IT, Letterkenny IT, Limerick IT, Technological University Dublin and University of Limerick.

The following analysis includes information on enrolments between academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020 in courses involving 30 or fewer ECTS leading to awards (i.e. qualifications).

## 5.1. HEA enrolment data and trends - micro-credentials in academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020

While the analysis of this data only provides a partial picture of student enrolments in short courses leading to minor, special purpose or supplemental awards from a subset of HEA-funded institutions, it offers valuable insights into demand trends and the profile of enrolled students. However, there is an important caveat to note: as most of the data available from the HEA pertains to institutes of technology, and assuming that unrepresented HEIs also award such qualifications, IOTs are over-represented in the available sample. To achieve a better understanding of small-volume qualification-awarding activity in HEA-funded institutions, this section would need to be complemented with information described in section 2, which presents data from the Irish Register of Qualifications. However, the IRQ data on small-volume qualifications is also incomplete and it does not record certification or enrolment data. Further, it would be a laborious exercise to combine the HEA and QQI data as no common index was used for qualifications.

Dashboard 9 and Table 5.1 below show that between academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020, there were 18,708 enrolments in courses leading to micro-credentials provided by Athlone IT, Cork IT, Dundalk IT, Galway-Mayo IT, Letterkenny IT, Limerick IT, Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) and University of Limerick.

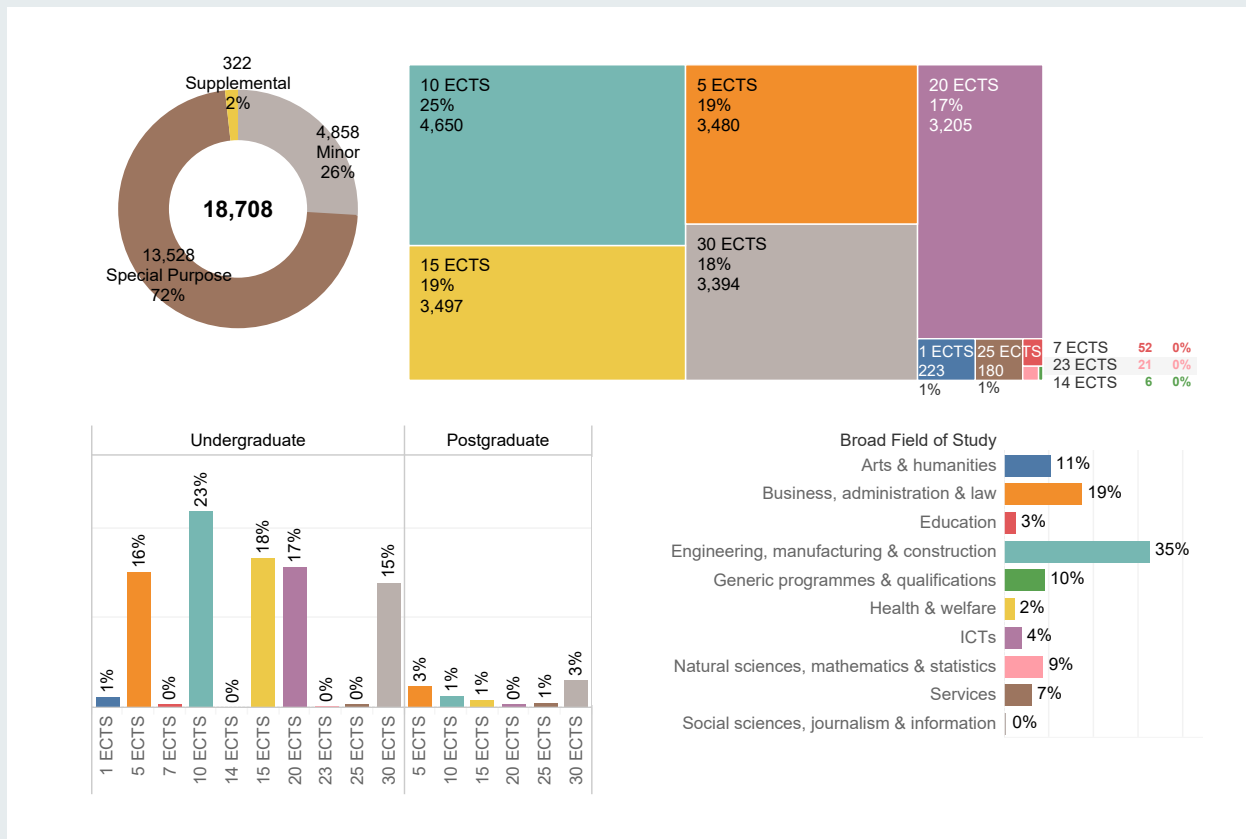
- Most of these enrolments led to special purpose awards.
- A quarter of all enrolments were in courses of 10 ECTS.
- Over 90% of enrolments were in courses that were labelled as undergraduate courses; and
- 35% of total enrolments were in the *engineering, manufacturing and construction* field of learning.

<sup>16</sup> The HEA works under statute with those HEIs receiving core public funding. These are: University Dublin City University, University College Cork, National University of Ireland, Galway, Maynooth University, Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, University of Limerick, RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences, TU Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, St Angela's College, National College of Art & Design, Mary Immaculate College, Athlone Institute of Technology, Munster Technological University (MTU), Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art and Design, Dundalk Institute of Technology Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Carlow, Institute of Technology Sligo, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Limerick Institute of Technology, Waterford Institute of Technology

# 5.

## ANALYSIS OF ENROLMENTS IN SMALL-VOLUME COURSES LEADING TO MINOR, SPECIAL PURPOSE OR SUPPLEMENTAL AWARDS FOR CERTAIN HEA-FUNDED INSTITUTIONS FOR THE ACADEMIC YEARS 2014/2015 TO 2019/2020 [CONTINUED]

**Dashboard 9 – Overview** – Total number of enrolments in courses leading to qualifications of ≤ 30 ECTS in HEA-funded institutions, in academic years 2014/2015– 2019/2020



Information on NFQ levels of these HEA enrolments in courses leading to micro-credential qualifications of ≤ 30 ECTS was not included in the dataset shared with QQI. Instead, they were classified under ten types of programmes: *Certificates, Foundation and Access, Higher Certificates, Honours Degrees, Ordinary Degrees, Postgraduate Certificates, Postgraduate Occasionals, Taught Masters, Undergraduate Certificates Pre16/17 and Undergraduate Occasionals*<sup>17</sup>.

Chart 5.1 shows that most of the student enrolments were in programmes of type 'Certificates' and 'Undergraduate Occasionals'.

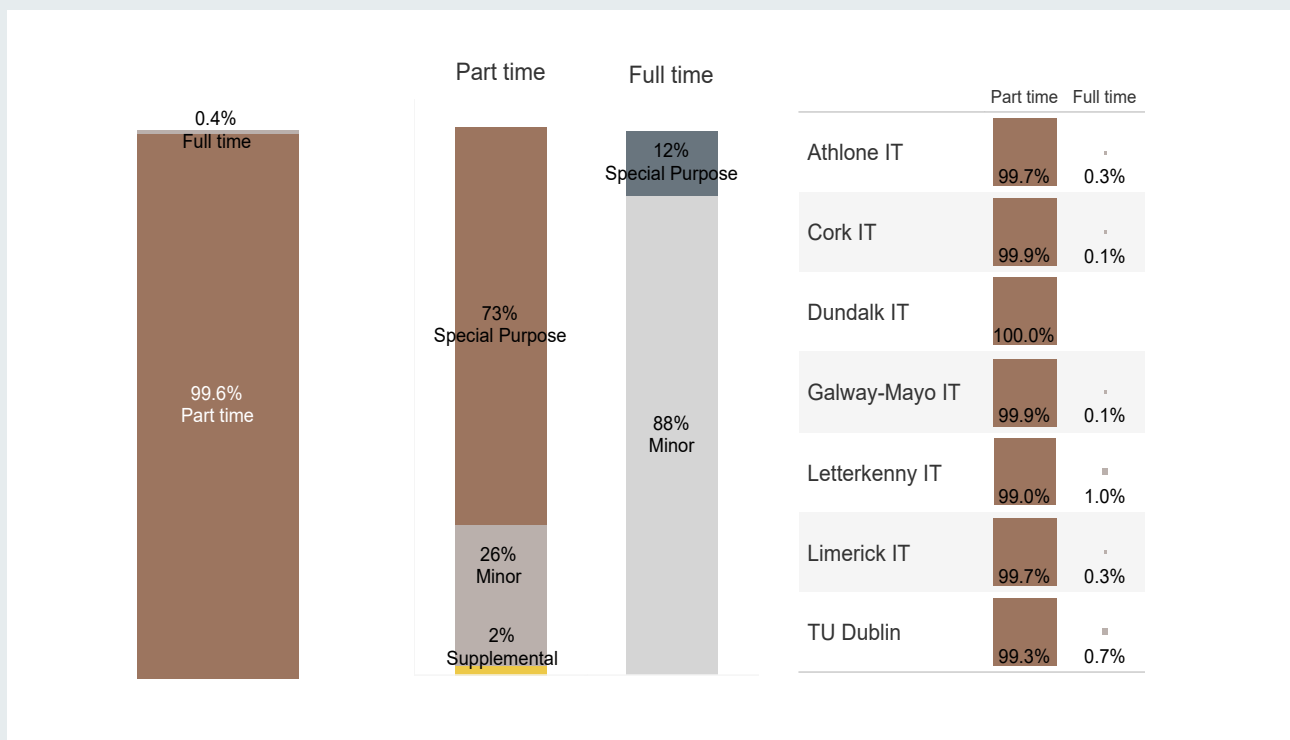
**Chart 5.1** - Total numbers of enrolments in the subset of HEA-funded institutions in courses of ≤ 30 ECTS by award class and programme type, in academic years 2014/2015–2019/2020

Programme Type	Minor	Special Purpose	Supplemental	Total
Certificates	719	7,346		8,065
Foundation and Access	114	139		253
Higher Certificates		12		12
Honours Degrees		301		301
Ordinary Degrees		315		315
Postgraduate Certificates	10	398		408
Postgraduate Occasionals	442	530	230	1,202
Taught Masters		77		77
Undergraduate Certificates Pre16/17	9	877		886
Undergraduate Occasionals	3,564	3,533	92	7,189

<sup>17</sup> Undergraduate certificates are awarded at NFQ Level 6, undergraduate diplomas and ordinary degrees at Level 7, honours degrees and higher diplomas at Level 8, postgraduate certificates, postgraduate diplomas and masters at Level 9 and PhDs at Level 10.

Dashboard 10 below shows that almost all student enrolments in these small-volume programmes being investigated (98%) were delivered on a part-time basis at HE institutions. When looking at the proportion of programme delivery modes by class of award, we found that four in five of all full-time enrolments in small-volume programmes led to HE minor awards.

**Dashboard 10** – Delivery mode of small-volume programmes ( $\leq 30$  ECTS) according to class of award and HE institution, in academic years 2014/2015 – 2019/2020





### COMPARING FINDINGS table 1: overview - QQI and DAB HEA awards led to by courses with ≤ 30 ECTS 2014-2020

HEA's data on awards led to by courses with ≤ 30 ECTS	QQI's data on awards led to by courses with ≤ 30 ECTS
It reports on student enrolments	It reports on certification, i.e. on completion
Data is overrepresented by one type of HEI, the institutes of technology	It includes data from all QQI HE institutions
Most HE enrolments were in courses leading to special purpose awards	Same
Only 2% of HEA enrolments were in courses leading to supplemental awards	QQI has not yet made HE supplemental awards
10 ECTS was the most common volume	Same
19% of enrolments were on courses of 5 ECTS	QQI has not yet certified HE micro-credentials of 5 ECTS
<i>Engineering, manufacturing and construction</i> was the most popular field of learning (note: data from IRQ portal revealed that <i>Business, administration and law</i> is the most popular field of learning)	<i>Business, administration and law</i> most popular field of learning
Typically, students enrol in <i>Certificate</i> and <i>Undergraduate Occasional</i> programme-types	QQI does not use this classification scheme
HEA data do not include NFQ level of minor, special purpose or supplemental qualifications	Levels 6 and 8 were the typical NFQ levels achieved by QQI learners who earned micro-credentials
Part-time is the most common mode of delivery for these programmes (99.6% are part-time). Full-time programmes tend to lead to minor awards	Part-time is also the most common mode of delivery. The proportion of part-time programmes against full-time was 84%

#### 5.2 General trends - number of small-volume course enrolments between academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020

Chart 5.2 below provides information on trends relating to enrolments in programmes of ≤ 30 ECTS in the subset of HEA-funded institutions for which data is available between academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020. It shows that:

- enrolments fell consecutively in the last two academic years by 8% and 7%. This decrease affected all classes of awards involved here.

The number of enrolments peaked in academic year 2017/2018 at 3,578.

**Chart 5.2 - Overview** – Trends, numbers and percentage change in enrolments in programmes of  $\leq 30$  ECTS in the subset of HEA-funded institutions for which data is available from the HEA, between academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020

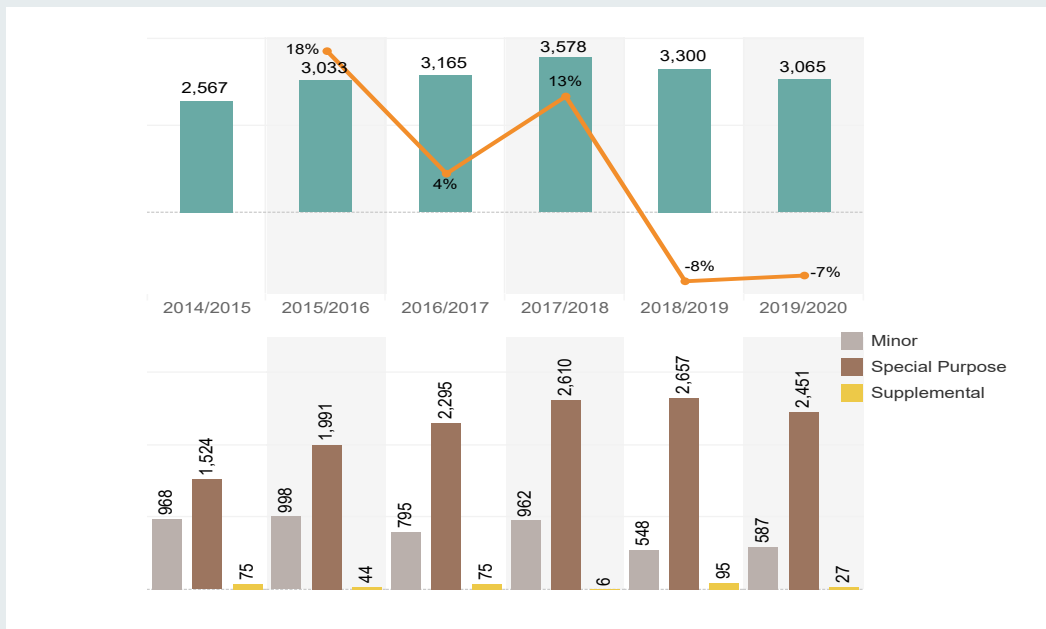


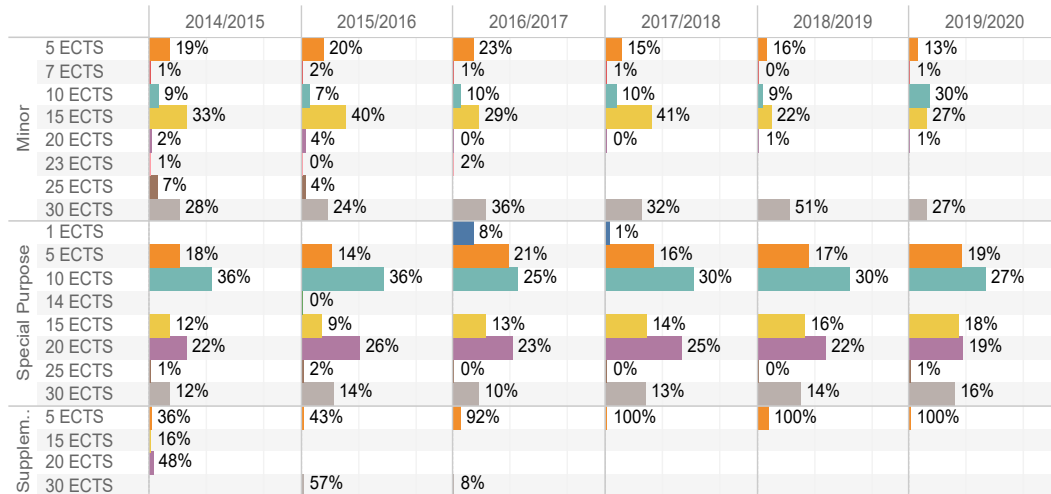
Chart 5.3 below provides information on trends relating to **enrolments in programmes of  $\leq 30$  ECTS in the subset of HEA-funded institutions for which data is available from the HEA**, according to ECTS and class of award. It shows how these enrolments have evolved since 2014:

- in relation to **minor awards**, the number of enrolments in courses of 10 ECTS increased in comparison with courses of 5, 15 and 30 ECTS. Enrolment in courses of 20, 23 or 25 ECTS was near zero in the academic years under analysis.
- in relation to **special purpose awards**, the number of enrolments in courses of 5, 15 and 30 ECTS grew for the third consecutive academic year in 2019/2020 in comparison with courses of 10 and 20 ECTS. Enrolments in special purpose courses of 1, 14 and 25 ECTS were not in demand in the period analysed.
- in relation to **supplemental awards**, enrolments utilising the available ECTS range were not evident in the dataset; and for the last three years only enrolments in courses of 5 ECTS were found at the HEIs included in this analysis.

# 5.

## ANALYSIS OF ENROLMENTS IN SMALL-VOLUME COURSES LEADING TO MINOR, SPECIAL PURPOSE OR SUPPLEMENTAL AWARDS FOR CERTAIN HEA-FUNDED INSTITUTIONS FOR THE ACADEMIC YEARS 2014/2015 TO 2019/2020 [CONTINUED]

**Chart 5.3 - Trends:** proportions of enrolments in programmes of ≤30 ECTS in the subset of HEA-funded institutions for which data is available from the HEA by awards class and ECTS\*, academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020



\*0% means that the number of enrolments was less than 1% for a particular academic year, class of award and ECTS credit. On the other hand, blank cells means that no enrolment occurred in a particular academic year, class of award and ECTS credit.

Chart 5.4 presents annual proportions of the numbers of enrolments in programmes of ≤30 ECTS among the HEIs analysed. It shows that Cork IT and TU Dublin, in the academic year 2019/2020, were the providers of the largest numbers of such programmes in the subset. Prior to this, TU Dublin had had the largest number within this subset.

**Chart 5.4 - Overview,** total number of enrolments in programmes of ≤ 30 ECTS among the HEIs analysed by provider, academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020

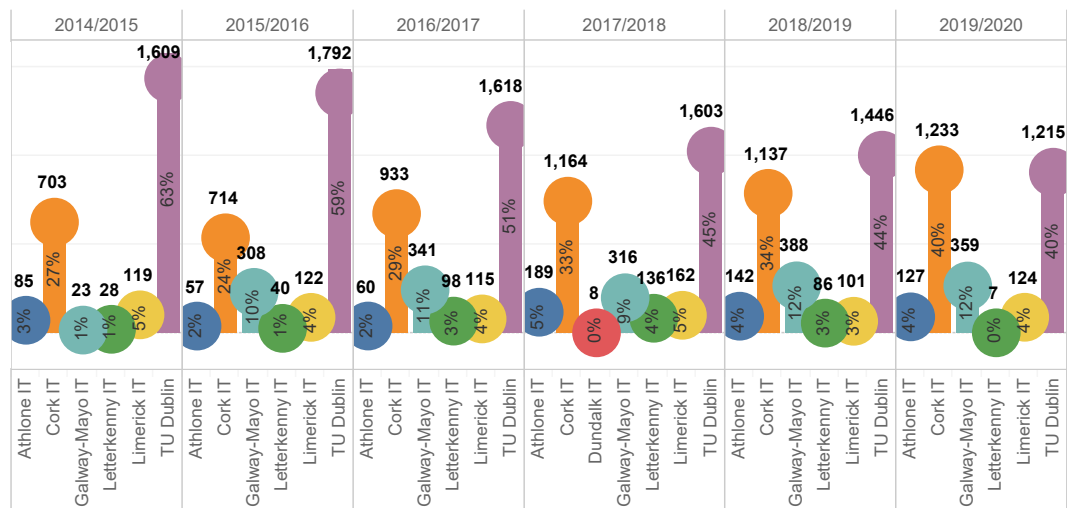


Chart 5.5 below presents the top 20 programmes over the 6-year period from the subset in terms of enrolment numbers organised by title, award class, ECTS credits and provider name. These top 20 programmes represent on average 41% of the total number of enrolments for each academic year.

When looking at the titles of the top 20 courses, we observe that:

- while there are only four minor awards in the top 20 group, the number of enrolments in these was among the highest and all of them were offered by TU Dublin.
- all top 20 awards seem, from the title, to focus on narrow components of a learning area with a clear skill-based focus. As for the QQI awards analysed in section 3, this suggests that students enrol in these programmes with a view to upskilling or reskilling in a particular narrow knowledge area.

**Chart 5.5** – Top 20 programmes from the subset by enrolment numbers, academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020, annual proportions

			2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	
Minor	Certificate in Project Management	15 ECTS	TU Dublin	187	217	120	222		
	CPD e-(Bio) Pharma Chem Certificate	15 ECTS	TU Dublin	77	126	93	152	104	151
	CPD Professional Musicianship (Performance or Songwriting)	30 ECTS	TU Dublin	115	132	111	108	97	68
	CPD School of Mechanical and Transport Engineering Certificates	5 ECTS	TU Dublin	47	35	47	53	33	47
	Certificate Lean Sigma Green Belt	15 ECTS	Cork IT	49	64	100	97	73	58
	CPD Architectural Practice Diploma	30 ECTS	TU Dublin	40	55	11	111	110	109
	Certificate in Science in Quality Management	20 ECTS	Galway-May..		77	96	89	84	67
	Certificate Project Management	15 ECTS	TU Dublin					194	199
	Certificate Digital Marketing	20 ECTS	Cork IT	46	77	88	65	34	72
	CPD Managing People Skills Certificate	5 ECTS	TU Dublin	48	5	96	47	101	34
Special Purpose	Certificate in Science in Fundamentals of BioPharma and Med-Technology	20 ECTS	Athlone IT				137	119	71
	Certificate Automation and Control Systems	15 ECTS	Cork IT	58	37	56			
		20 ECTS	Cork IT				57	53	58
	Single Subject Certification Arts Modules	5 ECTS	Cork IT	39	38	57	56	61	66
	Single Subject Certification Tourism Modules	5 ECTS	Cork IT		16	48	81	76	95
	CPD Sales Practice Certificate	10 ECTS	TU Dublin	32	265				
	Certificate Quality Assurance	10 ECTS	Cork IT	47	37	50	47	44	55
	CPD Volunteering Certificate	10 ECTS	TU Dublin	54	38	57	54	73	
	Certificate Project Management	15 ECTS	Cork IT	36	36	47	52	43	57
	Certificate in Leadership and Management in Education	10 ECTS	Limerick IT	28	46	50	52	45	49
	CPD Occupational Health and Safety	10 ECTS	TU Dublin	16	8	15		15	
		20 ECTS	TU Dublin	21	38	68	32	30	23
<b>Total</b>			<b>940</b>	<b>1,347</b>	<b>1,210</b>	<b>1,512</b>	<b>1,389</b>	<b>1,279</b>	

### COMPARING FINDINGS table 2: trends - QQI and DAB HEA awards led to by courses ≤ 30 ECTS micro-credentials 2014–2020

HEA's data on awards led to by courses with ≤ 30 ECTS micro-credentials	QQI's data on micro-credentials awards led to by courses with ≤ 30 ECTS
The numbers of enrolments in micro-credential programmes decreased in the last two consecutive academic years	There is an upward trend in the demand for QQI micro-credentials and numbers have increased year on year since 2014
The number of enrolments peaked in academic year 2017/2018	Same, considering certification year 2017
The full range of 5 to 30 ECTS courses was underutilised and enrolments became more numerous for programmes of 5, 10, 15, 20 and 30 ECTS against of those of 1, 7, 23 and 25 ECTS	Only programmes of 5, 10, 15, 20 and 30 ECTS are available in QQI HE sector. Data suggests that HE providers were increasing, making use of the full range of ECTS and that learners were capitating on it (except for programmes of 5 ECTS)
There were two dominant providers according to student enrolments in micro-credentials: TU Dublin and IT Cork	An increasing number of QQI HE providers were widening the supply and offer of micro-credentials
The analysis of the top 20 micro-credentials according to number of student enrolments, suggests that they focus on narrow components of a learning area and that they are skill-based qualifications	Same

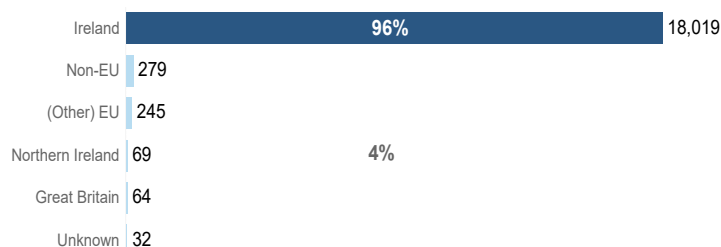
#### 5.3. Profile of HEA data - General characteristics

The HEA data **on programmes of ≤ 30 ECTS is** from a subset of the HEIs that it funds. The data on student enrolments includes information on six 'domicile groups': Ireland, Non-EU, (Other) EU, Northern Ireland, Great Britain and Unknown.

Charts 5.6 and 5.7 below present some information on student enrolments in programmes of ≤ 30 ECTS in the HE institutions included in the analysis according to these 'domicile groups.'

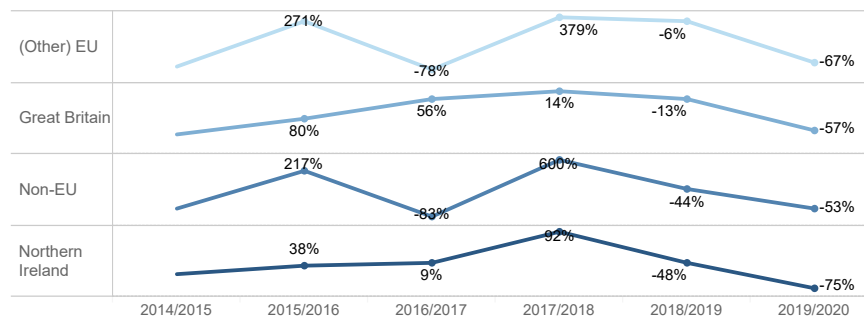
Chart 5.6 shows that 96% of student enrolments in programmes of ≤ 30 ECTS were from Irish domiciled students between academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020.

**Chart 5.6** - Domicile groups, enrolments in courses leading to qualifications of ≤ 30 ECTS in HEA-funded institutions, in academic years 2014/2015– 2019/2020



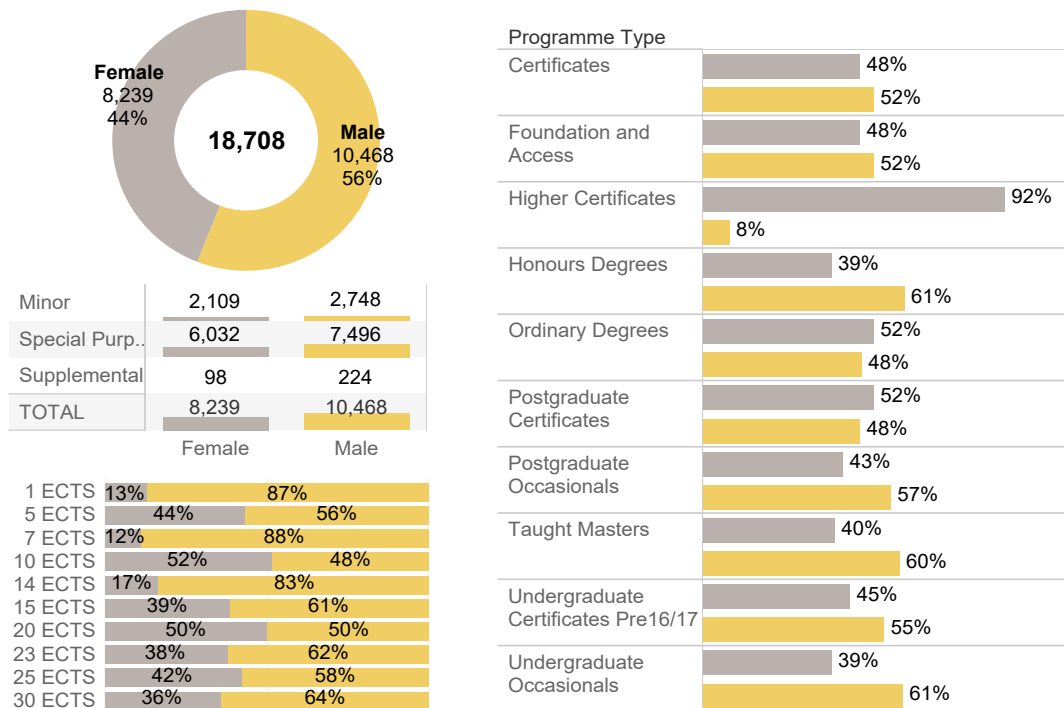
Although the number of enrolments from non-national domiciled students in micro-credentials was small in the six-year period shown, it is worth noting that numbers from this group of students decreased sharply in the last two academic years, particularly from Non-EU and Northern Ireland domiciled students (the numbers are so small that percentages are more useful as the absolute numbers for presentation purposes).

**Chart 5.7** - Domicile groups, non-national domiciled enrolments in courses leading to qualifications of  $\leq 30$  ECTS in HEA-funded institutions, in academic years 2014/2015– 2019/2020



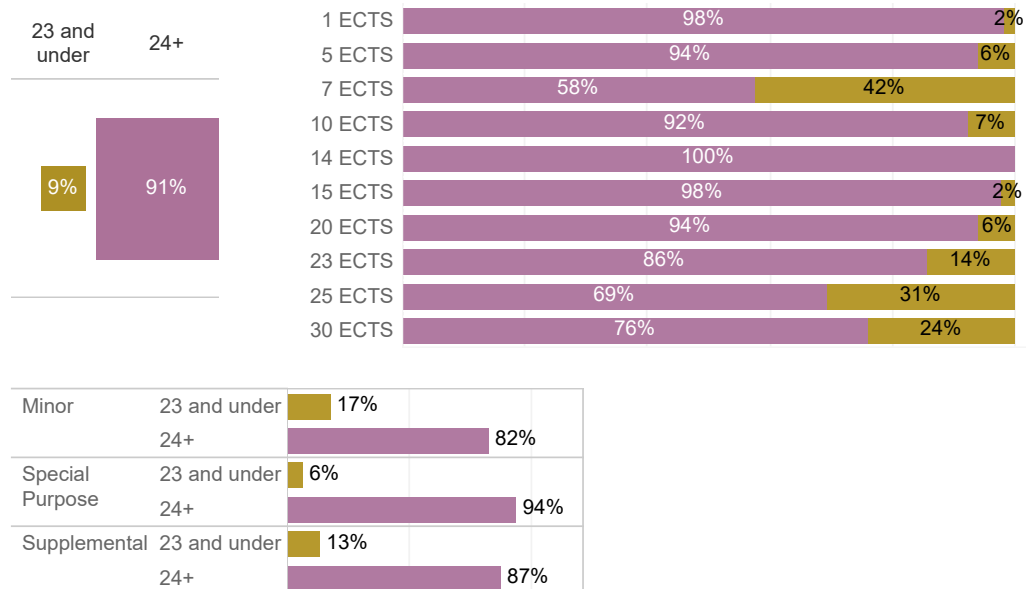
Dashboard 11 below presents the total number of enrolments from the subset of HEA-funded institutions included in this analysis by gender. The data is disaggregated by award class, programme type and ECTS. They show that:

- on average 56% of all enrolments between academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020 were male, 44% were female.
- male enrolments were higher than female enrolments for all classes of awards and ECTS credit-ranges (except for enrolments in micro-credentials of 20 ECTS where the average number of male and female enrolments is equal).
- in terms of class of award and ECTS, the gender gap is more prominent for supplemental awards and for awards of 1 and 7 ECTS.
- enrolments in courses of type '*Higher Certificates*' were mainly by female students. For the rest of the programmes, the gender split is balanced.

**Dashboard 11** – Total number of HEA enrolments in programmes of ≤ 30 ECTS by gender according to programme type, class of award and ECTS credit, in academic years 2014/2015– 2019/2020

Information on the age of students **enrolled in programmes of ≤ 30 ECTS** from HEA data is classified under two age-groups: those aged 23 or under; and those aged 24 and over.

Dashboard 12 below shows that most students enrolled in micro-credential programmes between academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020 were aged 24 or older (91%).

**Dashboard 12** – HEA enrolments in programmes of  $\leq 30$  ECTS by age group, according to class of award and ECTS, in academic years 2014/2015 and 2019/2020

While the number of **enrolments in programmes of  $\leq 30$  ECTS** are more numerous for the '24 +' than for the '23 and under' age-group for all classes of awards and ECTS ranges, there is one programme where this does not hold: 7 ECTS minor award, *CPD Bar Studies Certificate*, offered by TU Dublin (which is dominated by male students, see Dashboard 11).



### COMPARING FINDINGS table 3: profile of students – QQI and DAB HEA awards led to by courses with ≤ 30 ECTS micro-credentials 2014–2020

HEA's data on awards led to by courses with ≤ 30 ECTS micro-credentials	QQI's data on micro-credentials awards led to by courses with ≤ 30 ECTS
It includes information on 'domicile groups', showing that only 4% of all enrolments in micro-credentials were non-Irish domiciled. The number of this type of students enrolling in micro-credential programmes decreased dramatically in the last two academic years	QQI certification data does not include information on 'domicile groups', which curtails the analysis of an important aspect of the Irish QQI E&T sector
Enrolments in micro-credential programmes are higher for male than for female students	On average, there are more female learners achieving micro-credentials than male learners
Enrolments are classified under two age-groups. This poses a limitation for conducting deeper analyses of the profile of students	QQI certification data includes information on the actual age of the learner



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